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THOMAS McGUANE:
THE MYTHOLOGY OF DISAPPEARANCE

By

CECILIA McVEA

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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....Cecilia McVea.....

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Date: October 14, 1985

Is there a way to walk which living has obscured?
(Our feet are trying to remember some path we are walking toward.)

William Stafford

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled THOMAS McGUANE: THE MYTHOLOGY OF DISAPPEARANCE submitted by Cecilia McVea in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

.....
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Date: October 11, 1985

For Gerry Groves.

ABSTRACT

McGuane's novels "traverse the boundary between a world that is disappearing and one that is coming to take its place." The absence of any valid cultural conviction in modern America creates nostalgia for the past and a mythology of disappearance.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore McGuane's evolving approach to the theme of the pressure of the past on the present through five of his novels. The Sporting Club is McGuane's satire of American history which has been mythicized extravagantly. In Ninety-Two In The Shade and Panama, the Romantic assumption of a "role" or "style" becomes (like the Hemingway "code") the only way to survive the banality of modern society. Nobody's Angel reveals that the search for the father is a quest to locate oneself in place and time. In Something To Be Desired, the protagonist learns that memories and legend preserve the past in a tradition which moves forward to shape the future.

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INTRODUCTION

For Thomas McGuane, America is a land of great hopes and disillusions. The nation began with great hopes, with the dream of freedom, equality, and prosperity for all. But as McGuane documents in his six novels, the reality of America comes nowhere near the mythology. The American dream of freedom and unfettered opportunity has been swallowed up by unrestrained progress, until now "Nobody knows, from sea to shining sea, why we are having all this trouble with our republic. . . ."[1]

McGuane's characters inhabit a world made increasingly absurd by technology, materialism, and pathological narcissism, a world "that no longer cared for the individual with his dread of homogeneity."[2]

The loss of individuality is merely the first symptom of the gradual disintegration of the dream upon which America was founded. In McGuane's books, the mythology of the frontier, the autonomy of the cowboy, the hunter, the fisherman, the rancher as well as the idea of the unlimited territory stretching West comprise an ideal cultural mythology with more basis in fiction than reality. The reality is that "so much has been lost." It is this lack of a connection to the past which is a recurring theme in McGuane's writing. Wallace Stegner expresses the same sentiment:

> Millions of Westerners, old and new, have no sense of the personal and possessed past, no sense of any continuity between the real western past which has been mythicized almost out of recognizability and a real western present. . . .[3]

My first chapter will treat this theme as developed in McGuane's first novel, The Sporting Club, which satirizes America's idealization of its past. Each following chapter will discuss another aspect of this theme of the disappearing past as it evolves in McGuane's work.

Rebels and Loners

McGuane's protagonists move from Florida to the West but in each case the loss of a connection to the past deprives the hero of a true identity. This is shown by the alienation between generations, and in particular by the broken relationship between father and son. The frequent death, absence, or denial of the father is McGuane's metaphor for the loss of cultural identity and tradition in America.

In this thesis I wish to show, first of all, that the sense of loss felt by all McGuane's protagonists is this lack of personal and cultural identity. At times McGuane's characters literally do not know who they are, trapped in solipsism: "I am enclosed in here, in my reflecto Ray Bans. Look at me and what do you see? Yourself."[4] In Panama, Chet speaks of being "a tenant in myself" and his girlfriend knows that "the loving child who seems lost behind the

reflecto Ray Bans, perhaps or probably really is lost" p. 8) because of his inability to connect emotionally with others. Chet says:

> The immaculate dream of touching and holding was shed and I stood, an integer, not touched; for nothing but power. I couldn't even name my dog. But there was something as simple as to ache in the literal heart and chest for all of us who had lost ourselves as parents lose children, to the horizon which is finally only overtaken in remorse and in death. (Pan, p. 43)

Related to this, the personal dilemmas of McGuane's characters, adrift in a society to which they feel no sense of belonging, replicate on an individual level the cultural malaise of America, especially the West where everything authentic and unique to the region has been torn up and replaced, turned into a supermarket like every other supermarket across America. The American penchant for worshipping progress at the expense of history has produced mass mediocrity. As Tom Skelton says in Ninety-Two in the Shade:

> He had a feeling that on the plains of America everyone was named Don and Stacey. He knew that spiritual miniaturism frequently lay waiting in the foothills where a ranch was exchanged for a golf course; and that the Spalding Dot, the Maxfli, and the Acushnet soared over the bones of dead warriors. (92, p. 111)

The rapidity with which America and the West in particular has been relieved of its history constitutes a kind of deprivation. History has become myth after only two hundred years of settlement:

> You would have to care about the country. Nobody had been here long enough and the Indians had been very thoroughly kicked out. It would take a shovel to find they'd ever been here.[5]

America's heritage, recovered not through memory or even a history book, must wait for a shovel.

Due to this identity crisis, McGuane's characters experience a continual sense of displacement. Not only are characters like Nicholas Payne in The Bushwhacked Piano, Chet Pomeroy in Panama, and Patrick Fitzpatrick in Nobody's Angel loners, and misfits in family and society, but their desire to know their origins forces them to embark on a search through America to gain the connections they need. In The Bushwhacked Piano, Nicholas Payne is an example of one who had "in the past. . . run up and down America unable to find that apocryphal country in any of its details."[6] This lack of historical continuity produces isolation and an associated memory loss and fear of death.

The Code and the Myth

The second point I want to make in this thesis is that McGuane's protagonists cope with their rootless condition in specific ways. One way is through reliance on a fixed code or ritual. James Quinn in The Sporting Club, Nicholas Payne in The Bushwhacked Piano,[7] and Tom Skelton in Ninety-Two in the Shade, like almost all McGuane's heroes, are misfits and loners engaged in solitary pursuits such as hunting, fishing and guiding. Through devotion to a fixed code of behaviour,

these protagonists hope to escape or at least endure their sense of alienation from "Hotcakesland". As one of McGuane's heroes expresses it, "Everything that meant anything was being sold to guitarists and pants designers. He was going to fish quietly and sweat it out." (STBD, p. 60) I intend to concentrate on Ninety-Two in the Shade to illustrate this point.

Another way in which McGuane's heroes compensate for their lack of a meaningful past is through the invention of a myth or legend into which they fit themselves. Panama is the novel which my discussion of this point will focus on. In Panama, the protagonist relies less on a "code" than on the adherance to the legend of Jesse James which time has made ideal and unchangeable. Clearly, each of McGuane's heroes fears time and attempts either through a ritualization of experience or through obsessive identification with a heroic past, to halt time and the approach of death.

As loners and rebels, McGuane's protagonists identify with similar figures from the past. "I stand for those who have made themselves up," says Chet Pomeroy, "I am directly related to Jesse James. . . . I personally think he was someone who could not live on the main line any more than me. . . ." (PAN, p. 86) For Quinn, Skelton, and Nicholas Payne, outlaws like Jesse James and Billy the Kid represent that spirit of freedom, individuality, and rebellion against

security which opened up America. In addition, these legendary heroes came from a time when a man's role seemed clear-cut and unambiguous, a time in the past when "there were still things to be said." (PAN, p. 84) McGuane's heroes feel themselves to be in a direct line from such men, almost reincarnations of them, and they dream of gaining their immortal status.

Groping for something to connect the present to the past, these characters turn to the figures of popular memory. They figuratively (and even literally) rob the crypts of these self-made men in order to invent themselves. Moreover, to take on the identities of these great names is to kick free of time and its inevitable oblivion. Nicholas Payne decided he will "become a legend" because

> I believe that in pretending to be something you aren't you have your only crack at release from the bondage of time. (BP, p. 104)

As everyone knows, legends never die.

Failure to connect with the past leads to unrestrained individualism, a dangerous solipsism which creates its own world and its own rules, and ends in madness. Vernor Stanton in The Sporting Club, Nichol Dance in Panama, and Tio in Nobody's Angel are the pure products of "America, my baby madhouse" (PAN, p. 155) and "terrifyingly unconnected." (NA, p. 282) These paranoid monomaniacs, one of whom inevitably crops up in each of McGuane's novels, certainly can't live on the mainline of American society. They are

heroic in their madness and at one with their illusions. Such characters represent the extreme of disconnection from society and live almost entirely in worlds they have created for themselves.

Returning Home

McGuane's preoccupation with the problem of identity is apparent throughout his work, but there is a clear progression in his treatment of this theme from his early to his later novels. In the earliest novels, the hero's alienated condition is clear but no reasons for it are given; the malaise seems to be attendant on the times and part of the general collapse of the "American Dream," the weak spots of which McGuane stabs with devastating satire.

McGuane's "superfluous" men are cut off, lost, and generally torn from their origins. "Belong. What a word. Drives everyone fucking nuts. . . ." (p. 77) says Lucien in Something To Be Desired. But an ignorance of the circumstances that have gone to shape oneself and one's surroundings leads to alienation and isolation in McGuane's view. Without a knowledge of that history there is no sense of belonging to your place and time. As Patrick observes in Nobody's Angel:

> The family had now lived in this part of Montana for a very long time, and they still did not fit or even want to fit. . . . They would bear forever the air of being able to pick up and go, of having no roots other than the entaglement between themselves;. . . when they

> were gone, everyone would say in some fashion or another that they had never been there anyway, that they didn't fit. (p. 104)

In the later novels, Panama, Nobody's Angel, and Something To Be Desired, the idea of personal identity has evolved considerably. In these novels McGuane endeavours to reconcile the desire for individuality with the opposing desire for some kind of spiritual identity with one's surroundings. The hero as societal outcast whose motto is "non serviam" develops into the hero who has accepted that his individuality is irrevocably bound up with his past, with the accidents of people, place, and time that shape lives from generation to generation.

The transitional novel for this shift to a reconciliation with the past is Panama. At the end of this novel, Chet Pomeroy casts off his crippling isolation and memory loss and speaks the name of the person who has come to see him:

> At twelve o'clock Jesse came. . . . He said "We want the same thing." ". . ." You know who I am," he said quietly. "Can't you say hello?"
>
> When I was young, we used to dive into the swimming pool from the highest board on moonless nights, without looking to see if there was water in the pool, knowing that it was emptied twice a month. I felt the same blind arc through darkness when I spoke to my father. (PAN, p. 175)

With this recognition of the past as a powerful force in shaping the present and future, McGuane's novels move, thematically and structurally, from the closed universe of alienation and absurdity (The Sporting Club, Ninety-Two in

the Shade, Panama) to a world of wider possibilities and greater fidelity to human type in Nobody's Angel and Something To Be Desired. The last two chapters of my thesis will explore the evolving significance of connections to the past in Nobody's Angel and Something To Be Desired, especially as concerns relationships between fathers and sons.

In some manner the son's identity is mysteriously defined by the father. A father stamps his mark on his son and releases him into time like a hawk banded for identification and set free. Something To Be Desired tells the story of three lives: Gene, his son Lucien, and Lucien's son, James. But the uncanny similarities among the three lives leave the reader with the sense that all three lives are connected through time. This sense of history as cyclical rather than linear becomes in McGuane's work, a way of looking at fathers and sons, as well as the past and the present. The bond of blood is a legacy to the future ensuring that something of the father goes forward.

Notably, in his last two novels, set in the West, McGuane begins to see the connection to family and cultural tradition as achieved through place; his heroes must inevitably return home. There is a certain symbolic value attached to place as if a landscape could brand itself into your soul and summon you back from far away. Thus, for example, the "blue hole" which Lucien and his father stumble

across when the boy is only ten proves to be the site of significant future events; it is in this hotspring that he reencounters Emily after many years, eventually to claim the ranch and make his fortune off the spring.

In essence, the desire for a connection to the land is a desire for a connection to the past. The powerful force of the past is felt in the old mountains of the West, the "ancient earthquake faults and brush canyons that turned upon themselves like seashells," (STBD, p. 59) although it is "a land forever strange" (STBD, p. 122) because of its unspoken history.

It is as if the terrible immensity of time invested in the earth, that "icy transept of time," can be tempered only by the human traditions and ceremonies which order and pattern the rotation of the seasons in a year.

In the Crow Indian burial sites, Patrick Fitzpatrick sees a continuity which stretches from the past to the future.

> It was a beautiful place, where the Crow had buried their dead in the trees, a spring that had mirrored carrion birds, northern lights and the rotation of the star system. (NA, p. 103)

McGuane's novels traverse the boundary between "a world that is disappearing and one that has come to take its place."[8] The past vanishes, leaving only traces of itself in a new world. But between the world that is disappearing

and the one that must inevitably take its place, McGuane sees room for the belief that "the world to come will be shaped forever in memories and legends."[9]

Notes - Introduction

[1] Thomas McGuane, Ninety-Two in the Shade, (1973; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1980), p. 3. Further references to this work appear in this chapter cited as 92. Other editions used in this thesis as follows:

The Sporting Club, (1969; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1979).

The Bushwhacked Piano, (1971; rpt. New York: Warner Books, 1973).

Panama, (1978; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1979).

Nobody's Angel, (1979; rpt. New York: Random House, 1981).

Something To Be Desired, (1984; rpt. New York: First Vintage Books, 1984).

These editions are reprints chosen for convenience and availability.

[2] Thomas McGuane, Something To Be Desired (New York: Random House Vintage Contemporaries, 1984), p. 6. Further references in this chapter cited as STBD.

[3] Wallace Stegner, "History, Myth, and the Western Writer," in The Sound of Mountain Water (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 199.

[4] Thomas McGuane, Panama (1978; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 159. Further references in this chapter cited as PAN.

[5] Thomas McGuane, Nobody's Angel (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 104. Further references in this chapter cited as NA.

[6] Thomas McGuane, The Bushwhacked Piano (1971; rpt. New York: Warner Books, 1973), p. 6. Further references in this chapter cited as BP.

[7] The Bushwhacked Piano is an intermediary novel between The Sporting Club and Ninety-Two in the Shade. I have chosen not to deal with this novel because of space constraints within the limitations of a thesis and because many of the themes of The Bushwhacked Piano are repeated in Ninety-Two in the Shade. Furthermore, The Bushwhacked Piano does not significantly advance the themes of The Sporting Club.

[8] Thomas McGuane, Foreward, Vanishing Breed by William Albert Allard (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1982), pp. 6-7.

[9] McGuane, Foreward, p. 7.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SPORTING CLUB

McGuane's first novel, published in 1969, received mostly favourable reviews; however, few critics saw it as anything more than "a group of high-toned Sportsmen and their wives. . . and a colorful crew of. . . troublemakers who. . . proceed to annihilate the [Centennial] Club."[1] One perceptive critic was Sara Blackburn of the Nation who compared this "tight, funny, elusive and aristocratic novel" with truth to The Great Gatsby.[2] Joyce Carol Oates too, showed unusual insight when she observed: "And it is always possible that we are to take the destruction of the club as a moral act."[3] But no major reviews noted McGuane's satire of the sacred cows of American history.

The Sporting Club is an elaborate burlesque of American history. In this novel McGuane satirizes the idealized myth which constitutes America's dream of its past. McGuane directs his satire at the pious righteousness with which the ideals of democracy, equality, and freedom are accepted as the foundation of America when history points equally to injustice, cruelty, and hypocrisy. He is interested in how the myth of the past shapes society's view of itself, its identity.

The Sporting Club depicts a venerable Michigan institution, the Centennial Club, whose preoccupation is

with preserving its cherished tradition. The similarities between the Centennial Club and the American republic are inescapable. Not only do they share the same Fourth of July anniversary but the course of the club's acquisition of its lands and property is a satire on American expansion and settlement as the frontier moved westward. In many ways, The Sporting Club is an elaborate parody of the American preoccupation with its heroic past, with the birth of the Republic and the settlement of the continent which, according to McGuane, has been mythicized to grotesquery. When the Centennial Club is shorn of its myth and revealed as the corrupt and perverse institution it really is, the implication is that American democracy too is rotten at the core.

McGuane's debt to Mark Twain is very clear in this respect.[4] Twain detested the outdated notions of monarchy, aristocratic tradition, and the anti-bellum Southern airs which he saw in the American South. He saved his most virulent ire for the "Walter Scott disease" of excessive romanticism. Scott's romantic legends, in Twain's opinion, seduced the minds and hearts of the South with

> decayed and swinish forms of religion, with decayed and degraded systems of government; with the silliness and emptiness, sham grandeurs, sham gauds, and sham chivalries of a brainless and long vanished society.[5]

In the same way, McGuane satirizes the arrogant self-image of the Centennial Club members. In The Sporting Club, the group's history is a deliberate attempt to create a

myth. However, even as he satirizes the myth-making capacity of history, McGuane vindicates it. From an America of capitalist wealth and bourgeois conformity, James Quinn and Vernor Stanton escape, like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, into an outlaw world of freedom. In a sense they construct their own myth, a myth which, for James Quinn, harks back to an older model of gentlemanly self-reliance and independence. Vernor Stanton, on the other hand, embodies a myth of heroic individualism, a belief which becomes dangerous only when it threatens to overwhelm reality and take on an existence of its own.

In The Sporting Club, James Quinn is in retreat from the present. As owner of a Detroit automobile parts manufacturing company, he is spending his well-deserved holiday at the Centennial Club, a gentlemens' sporting club in Northern Michigan. James Quinn is going there to be a "northern gentleman," to forget Detroit and the grim round of paperwork, speeches, and company picnics which are his obligations as company president. He wants fishing, hunting, and a certain amount of dignified leisure. When he was young, Quinn "simply wanted to be a sportsman of gentlemanly cast and had modeled himself on the old trout fishermen of the Catskills and Adirondacks. . . who wore plus fours and rode carriages to their stretches on the Esopus or Beaverkill."[6]) On his holidays, Quinn intends to recreate that dream.

In the description of the club which opens the novel, from Blucher's Annals of the North (1919), McGuane lampoons the pretentious history projected by the club. As will become clear, this image is based on words rather than reality:

> Centennial Club (formerly the Shiawassee Rod and Gun Club): Grandest of the original sporting clubs of the Northern Lower Peninsula, founded by the barons of lumbering. . . . Its charter was written in 1868. . . . The operations of the Centennial Club are shrouded in well-guarded mystery. Nothing is known of its procedures but that membership is handed down from fathers to eldest sons. The vastness of the Centennial land holdings is widely known. . . . A mounting body of evidence has pointed to the club's large influence in state and local politics. (p. 11)

In readiness for the celebration of its one-hundredth anniversary, the Centennial Club is preparing a "social history with a view toward highlighting that spirit which went to make it the great institution which it was today." (147) The account of the first ten years of the club's history is missing, buried in a time capsule scheduled to be opened on the club's anniversary on the upcoming Fourth of July. In spite of this, the aptly-named Spengler, the club chronicler, freely invents the missing history, informing James Quinn that "'The thing is this, the first ten years are terra incognita and my job is to reconstruct them. I do not quail, Quinn'". (p. 55) An early account done around the turn of the century is brushed aside:

> "This was written by a local boy who resented the club and who was not a member. The name of his account was Hellfire in the Woods and tried to prove that the club was founded for disreputable reasons. I take issue, Quinn." (p. 54-55)

The accuracy of this earlier account does not become evident until the devastating climax of the Club's Independence Day celebrations.

McGuane uses Spengler's chronicle of the club's history to satirize the myth of equality of opportunity in early America. The gap between the privileged founders of the club and the ordinary homesteaders is clearly demonstrated in his

> dreary account of acquiring the miles of both banks of the Pere Marquette that they had today. It soft-pedaled the succession of magnificent bribes that had been necessary (two greedy Presidents had clamored for ample lacings of this payola) to uproot the homesteaders and loggers who had settled in the area. . . . (p. 147)

Nor was any opposition to be tolerated:

> . . . the founders decided, if, when push came to shove, these hicks tried to wave the Homestead Act of 1862 in their faces, then the founders would be obliged to sic the law on them. Open conflict set in and when the farmers appealed to decency, it was regarded as being neither here nor there. . . . (p. 147)

These settlers were driven from the land, "their minor prosperity undone and, to this day, unrecovered." (148)

With this appalling history of corruption and speculation which the Centennial Club members are so proud of, McGuane intends a parody of the mythic overtones of much historical rhetoric:

> Against the northern sky the great lodge had taken shape. . . . There was shelter, Indians, northern lights; in the beginning wolf and lynx challenged women, children, picnic tables. The founders dreamt of a better life, a place in the forest that would be safe for their own kind, for their hopes, their hibachi dreams. (p. 149)

The paucity of such "hibachi dreams" is one of McGuane's ironic comments on the American ideals of prosperity and progress.

The members of the Centennial Club with their superior airs and arrogant ways are worthy inheritors of such founders. These men are hopelessly stuffy, pompous, and rigid in their views. Fortescue, the military man, collects military miniatures in order to reproduce battles in exact details. Spengler is the club chronicler, responsible for the club's overblown history, and McGuane describes Scott, another long-time member, as "a sometime writer on seventeenth century topics." Such pursuits characterize these members as gentlemen of leisure who do not need to soil their hands with manual labour. McGuane emphasizes their reverence for the club's tradition and history.

McGuane builds the novel around an important occasion for both the club and the American nation. For the Centennial Club, the Fourth of July marks one hundred years of a proud tradition in the same way that the nation celebrates Independence Day as the anniversary of the birth of American democracy. The battle for liberty and self-determination against the constricting rule of Britain was,

in essence, the cause for which the American Revolution was fought. This struggle for freedom and independence is an important part of the American identity. McGuane's point, however, is that both of these dates celebrate an event that was subsequently transformed into a myth. The noble tradition of the Centennial Club will be shown to be a fiction which disguises the sordid truth about the club's founders. McGuane implies that America, too, lives by the cultural myth that the Fourth of July is a heroic moment in the nation's history. From another point of view, however, the Fourth of July marks the date when the leaders of the Thirteen Colonies declared their formal independence from Britain to ensure the interests of their collective states against British oppression. These founding fathers of America were all from a privileged class of society and they governed, on the whole, as an oligarchy. The right to vote belonged only to property-owners and, invariably, these were the men who governed. The idea of democracy or the abolishment of slavery was not part of their personal beliefs nor the sole motive for the rebellion.[7] The ordinary man and of course the black slaves had no say in their government. This feudal tradition prevailed not only in the South where "old families" living in ante-bellum tradition on their plantations were common but also in the North until after 1800.[8] McGuane's point is that the founding fathers acted on a mixture of high principles and

good business instincts. Only the passage of time has shaped their history into myth.

The nature of the Centennial Club with its pretensions to aristocracy among its monied and propertied members bears many similarities to this privileged landowning class of early America. In fact McGuane labels the clique within the Centennial Club the "deadly offspring of the founding generation." (p. 47) Their struggle to retain power in their own hands is revealed in their pursuit of poachers, resentment of Jack Olson, the club manager, and their fear of his successor, Earl Olive.

The Sporting Club is McGuane's microcosm of the American nation. The central conflict of the novel is the showdown between the privileged clique of Centennial Club members and the common man represented by Earl Olive and his band of rude primitives. The struggle between these two groups is an exaggerated parody of Jacksonian democracy, the battle of the commonpeople against the "money power" as Andrew Jackson called the wealthy elite.[9] On the one hand are the Centennial Club members who inherited their privilege. These unscrupulous "bush tycoons" were the early capitalists, exploiting the land for profit:

> The forests flowed to the cities. . . . Timber cruisers goggled through white pine forests buying upland stands at swamp prices; not, mind you, the avaricious scuttling of unscrupulous lummoxes but straight Yankee ingenuity, a matter of being at the right place at the right time. (p. 149)

On the other hand are the ordinary people, represented first by Jack Olson and later by Earl Olive and the "Olives." The club members fear and resent their employees in very much the same way that the landed gentry of the early days of the American Union felt menaced by the prospect of common people obtaining the power to vote. Ironically, the club's worst fears are destined to be born out in the person of Earl Olive, whose conduct defies the club's genteel tradition. McGuane comically exaggerates Earl Olive's earthy behaviour contrasting it with the prudery of the club members.

Jack Olson, however, descended from the original settlers, is an expert woodsman and knows every inch of the club lands. McGuane gives him the characteristics of a true "northern gentleman":

> No one could replace him. His years of poaching on club property gave him knowledge of it all. He knew where salt licks had to go, what crop had to grow in the open valleys and when it had to be knocked down to make winterfeed for the game birds; he knew how to keep the lake from filling with weeds and reverting to swamp;. . . . The main lodge was calked and varnished at generous intervals; the Bug House screened and shingled. The lake maintained a good head of native-bred trout and the woods sang with life. (p. 61)

Whereas the Centennial Club members merely mouth their belief that "life in the forest means a return to older virtues," Olson makes his living from fishing and hunting. They resent Jack Olson because he easily exceeds them in these pursuits. McGuane uses Olson to expose the arrogant dream world which the members have made of the Centennial Club:

> They wanted to be the heroes and Olson made them look like buffoons when accident forced comparison. . . . For Olson, hunting and fishing were forms of husbandry because he guaranteed the life of the country himself. When the members came swarming out of the woods with their guns and high-bred animals and empty hands to find Olson. . . turning a pair of effortlessly collected grouse over a bed of hardwood coals,. . . they wanted to call the annual meeting right then and there and tell this interloper to get off the property before they got a cop. (p. 62)

When Vernor Stanton plants a rumour that Olson is trying to take over the club to turn it into a private shooting preserve, the club seizes on it as an excuse to get rid of him. Free to hire his own successor, Olson chooses Earl Olive, a small-time criminal and bait fisher in a club of fly fishers. The scene is set for a degraded repetition of the struggle between the privileged class and the common people, between the aristocratic pretensions of the Centennial Club members and the vulgar habits of Earl Olive and friends.

Olive, menacing and cocksure in his flashy cowboy clothes, introduces an ominous note of primitivism to the staid world of the club. While perhaps not as ruthless and cruel as the club members, Earl Olive's mob is portrayed by McGuane in almost as unfavourable a light. They are characterized by laziness, sadism, lasciviousness and stupidity as well as a mob mentality which makes them easily led and made to serve the petty tyrant, Earl Olive. The mistrust between the two groups hardens into opposition at the barbecue Olive holds to celebrate his new job:

> In the beginning, they watched from a distance. Earl Olvie had a washtub full of coals on a metal stand and he stood before it in a huge white puff of a chef's hat, turning meat. His friends sat on the stoop of his porch or swigged quart bottles of beer with their girlfriends. One tanned and heavily lined man in an azure shirt. . . trapped a fat lady between a tree and his desperately pumping pelvis. . . Earl Olive forked a piece of the cooking meat and held it out toward the trees. . . and said, "You want some? Come on, you hungry? Say so and Earl Olive will feed you." (p. 119)

The club group on the other hand

> . . . was quieter and showed more solidarity; and they stood in dense, composite order,. . . the group from the club said not one thing. . . . Between the two there was something like a magnetic field. (p. 120)

The antagonism between the two groups is very satisfying to Stanton who has deliberately manipulated the two groups to further his own ends. As he explains to Quinn:

> "M-my position here is well, essentially that of the nobleman. . . Olive's dealings with me and the other members make him the enemy within. May I predict that this is not going to be the usual boring, phlegmatic summer?. . . When I arrived I did everything I could to make things interesting. . . . Then I saw that rats and hats and ball-point pens weren't what it takes to electrify twenty-six thousand acres of forest and make it habitable. What it takes is tension and constant menace." (pp. 131-133)

Vernor Stanton does indeed see himself as a nobleman. His sole objective is to gain power for himself. He cleverly manipulates the weaknesses of club members and "Olives" alike in order to grab power for himself. McGuane depicts Stanton as a mad yet also heroic individual who is compelled to shape events to fit his ambitions.

The Sporting Club is McGuane's exploration of the desire to transform history into myth revealed in the Centennial Club's elaborately constructed background. Given this, Vernor Stanton carries this propensity to an extreme. Stanton feels only contempt for the notion of hereditary privilege and tradition within the Centennial Club. His Machiavellian tactics are a bid for total control of the Club. As he tells Quinn: "'I am sentimentally attached to these lands. And I have learned to be the enemy of the people that inherit them.'" (p. 133)

The rather staid James Quinn provides an effective foil to Vernor Stanton. Unlike the cautious Quinn, Stanton lives for the triumph of crushing his opponents. McGuane deliberately makes Stanton an attractive figure, and in many ways he is the hero of the novel. Out of his insatiable hunger for power, Stanton too creates his own myth which places him at the center of the Centennial Club. Half mad, Stanton's dreams far exceed the fictions created by the club members; he sees himself as a heroic figure destined to rule the Centennial Club. Not content to merely revise history into myth, Vernor Stanton wants to live out his own exalted myth. With his authoritative demeanor, obsession with honour, and habit of duelling, Stanton is reminiscent of Andrew Jackson.

McGuane's purpose is clear: he uses Stanton to satirize the tendency to make eminent historical figures into

legendary heroes. As champion of the ordinary people, farmers and planters whom he called "the bone and sinew of the country", Jackson was elected to presidential office. He put an end to special privilege, monopolies, and the centering of power in the hands of a favoured class. By nature despotic, however, Jackson, by the end of his term, had greatly enlarged the power of the President. While claiming that final power was determined by the will of the people, he considered himself to be the interpreter of just what the will of the people was.[10] Obviously, Vernor Stanton is modelled on Andrew Jackson. He likewise uses the common people, Earl Olive, and friends to gain power against the aristocratic club members. With this advantage, Vernor has no further use for Earl, contemptuously humiliating him in a duel, as he prepares to assume total power. Earl escapes to the woods howling in pain and anger but his revenge is swift and final. He dynamites the dam and the lodge, transforming the club's trout-filled lake into a "suppurating mud-hole":

> The destruction of the lodge was total. Only the plumbing stood out of the wreckage, white fixtures on pipe legs like mangrove hummocks. The cellar hole had begun to fill with water. The quantity of shattered lumber was astounding. (p. 146)

Soon the club has regressed to a state of tribal warfare, the members against the "Olives." As Quinn observes, "it could have been the Bronze Age." (p. 197)

The novel progresses to a final moment of truth which ironically comes out of the club's celebration of its cherished tradition. The anniversary celebrations commence but as Spengler has burnt his chronicle of the Club's history, only the time capsule remains to be revealed. It is Quinn who digs it up and opens it:

> The inside of the box was japanned metal. A large rolled sheet of some paper or parchment comprised its sole contents. This was tied about with ribbon that rubbed away to dust under Quinn's finger. He unrolled what proved to be a huge photograph. . . . Surely the question on top of the photograph blaring in gold leaf Dearest Children of the Twentieth Century, Do You Take Such Pleasures as Your Ancestors? could not be answered so forthrightly as it was asked. Surely nothing they could say or do now would flail the eye as this rickety nineteenth century light with which the photographer had recorded so outlandish a sexual circus at full progress. (pp. 201-202)

As forcefully as the dynamite exploded the dam and lodge, the photograph debunks the myth of the club's respected tradition. At the same time, the photograph generates its own myth-making powers. The club founders remain enigmatic. Either the photo is a huge joke played on posterity or an example of decadence too appalling to believe. As Quinn observes:

> The fact of the photograph and the world it revealed now held an adamantine reality that was at once as radiant and cloudy as myth. (p. 203)

In this destruction of the Centennial Club's fictional history, McGuane compares the fact of the photograph to a myth which both illuminates and obscures the world it contains. McGuane believes that this represents the usual

view of the past, partly known and partly invented. The Sporting Club makes the point that America's reverence of its history satisfies a need to preserve the ideals of the past in spite of the harsher reality of actual events. What is left of the club is spiralling rapidly into barbarism. Law and order have broken down as have sexual mores; in fact the club is now as bad or worse than the "Olives."

Increasingly obsessive and tyrannical, Vernor Stanton is winding down like a clock. The real danger lies in his inability to distinguish reality from his own delusions. The Centennial Club is his field of conquest, the "insolent world" he has created in order to carry out his own Napoleonic ambitions. He has made this "enormous world constructed from within, hermetic as it was reassuring. . ." (165) to satisfy his egomaniacal obsessions. As Quinn remarks:

> It used to be that behind all of his deliberate acts were abstract principles he could name, like courage, attainment, persistence; or irritation, interference, degradation. Quinn no longer knew how insistent Stanton was about this system; but he had a powerful suspicion that behind certain activities, the duelling or the episode on the bridge or at the Bug House, lingered these abstractions. (p. 94)

There is a note of elation in Stanton's voice as he declares the destruction of the club and its proud history:

> "this swinish pack of human refuse from which we all descend has put an end to our little organization by remote control. The end, the end. Finished. Extinction as in dinosaurs, top hats, the great auk--" (p. 204)

But Stanton too is racing towards his own end. The club has found a new cause in hunting down Earl Olive and once the horde has caught its victim, a final confrontation is staged, Vernor against Earl in a last duel. This time the guns are loaded with real bullets.

But both men discover that neither one can kill the other:

> At ten, Stanton spun, fired and missed. Quinn saw it. It was deliberate. He stood facing Olive with his chin on his chest, the weapon at his side. Olive held his gun with both hands for steadiness. He had as much time as he wanted. . . . He raised the end of the gun and fired over Stanton's head. "You bastard!" Stanton roared, as Olive flung the gun into the crowd, running. (pp. 213-214)

Each side needs the other to sustain its myth. Vernor Stanton is helpless without menace and conflict; deprived of it he feels "boxed-in" and as uneasy as Huck Finn kept too long in the lap of civilized society. Against enemies at first real but, increasingly with time, imaginary, he develops elaborate battles based on abstract principles. His own ego propels him toward greater megalomania and larger acts of arrogance which must eventually collapse. It is Earl Olive who refuses to shoot him and therein deprives him, one could speculate, of the ultimate legendary status, leaving him simply as "crazed and confused." (p. 216)

At the same time, the semi-legendary Vernor Stantons of history personify the larger-than-life heroes, the legends needed to sustain the myth which is fundamental to the

nation. Even Earl Olive cannot resist the lure of greatness, the wonder of the myth:

> Olive floundered helplessly toward them, borne on the fast and gleaming tide. As he neared them, he began to bay that Stanton would make them pay; Stanton wouldn't let anything happen to him, he bayed abjectly. . . . Now Quinn knew Stanton had gotten to him. Olive was a believer. He gazed, upside down and ahead, with numb sentimentality and contentment. (pp. 214-215)

Finally, "it was the end" and Quinn felt "this hermetic, outlandish thing punctured at last, a century of bad air expiring." (p. 217)

History for McGuane is the myth we live by, a form of cultural nourishment. The suggestion in The Sporting Club is that America's proud history is a myth which sustains the nation just as Spengler's chronicle invented a proud tradition for the Centennial Club. The truth of history is found somewhere in these myths in the same way that the real nature of the Centennial Club lies somewhere in that photo, "radiant and cloudy as myth." (p. 203)

When the "gentleman's sporting club with a past" goes up for sale, Stanton buys it. But both the club and Stanton are diminished; Stanton's towering individualism has been subdued. Now he plays out imitations of his old duels; he no longer has his pistols but he has plywood cutouts that are "much the same" and he and Quinn pace off and say "Bang, bang!" at each other soberly till a voice upstairs summons Stanton to bed. In its disintegration, the Club resembles

the decline of western civilization. The Centennial Club is reduced to the pathetic posturings of its last member.

> Quinn stole a look at Stanton whose features had clarified impressively under madness and loss of weight. He seemed heroic and at one with his illusions. (p. 218)

For James Quinn, the reluctant realist, Stanton's actions represent the pattern of history repeating itself: power, dominance, and finally disintegration as Stanton's hallucinations collapse.

The myth has been deflated, leaving nothing but the ritual. For Vernor Stanton, the worlds of reality and myth have been brought together and he can no longer distinguish between them. He carries on an unreal existence, like an actor in a performance with props and script rather than as a real person:

> Stanton talked well when he remembered; he never faltered from forgetting but stopped cleanly and waited for Janey to cue him. (p. 219)

McGuane has called The Sporting Club "an experiment in anarchy, a political paradigm,"[11] and the analogy between the Centennial Club and the American republic is unmistakeably satirical. The motive behind satire is a moral one; in The Sporting Club, McGuane condemns that view of American history which renders the nation's past inviolate. Although the novel is both comic and entertaining, McGuane's more serious intent is to show the power of myth as a source of cultural identity. A nation

perceives its identity in its past, and history invariably becomes the institutionalization of heroic myth.

McGuane sees America as shaped through this powerful process of memory and myth. Paradoxically, history is composed of both truth and fiction, and the clever and intricate plot of The Sporting Club debunks the patriotic lies of American history even as it demontrates the need for such ideals as symbols of individual and collective achievements in time. However repulsive Vernor Stanton finds the club's chronicle, the same ideals and ambitions fuel his antics: the myth of power, the myth of the individual. If Vernor Stanton is, to all appearances, "compromised" at the end of the novel and, ultimately a victim of his own illusions, still the legend of his heroic individualism lives on, another part of the myth forming. This myth-making is a process that McGuane sees as fundamental to an understanding of the past. At the same time, there must be room for the individual to make his own history within a tradition.

Notes - Chapter One

[1] Joyce Carol Oates, rev. of The Sporting Club, by Thomas McGuane, New York Times Book Review, 23 Mar. 1969, p. 4.

[2] Sarah Blackburn, rev. of The Sporting Club, by Thomas McGuane, Nation, 208 (1969), 475.

[3] Oates, p. 4.

[4] Albert Howard Carter III, "Thomas McGuane: An Interview", Fiction International, 4/5 Fall/Winter (1975), 55. McGuane remarks that Mark Twain has influenced his work: "Yes, I've read all of Twain very carefully, even that monstrous novel, The Mysterious Stranger."

[5] Walter Blair, Mark Twain and Huck Finn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), p. 292.

[6] Thomas McGuane, The Sporting Club (1969; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1971), p. 89. Further references to this work cited in the text.

[7] S.C. Morison and H.S. Commager, The Growth of the American Republic, 5th ed. (1930; rpt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), I, 468.

[8] It was westward expansion which finally opened up the vote to all white males as new lands were settled in which no "old families" existed to represent the population.

[9] H.W. Bryant, "Jackson, Andrew", New Encyclopedia Britannica: Macropaedia, 1977 ed.

[10] A.M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Jackson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1945), p. 163.

[11] Carter, p. 62.

> Fishing for sport is itself an act of racial memory and in places. . . it moves toward the purer symbolism of tournaments. An Outside Chance

CHAPTER TWO

NINETY-TWO IN THE SHADE

Chapter One discussed Thomas McGuane's use of history and myth in his first novel, The Sporting Club. In that novel, the myth of the Centennial Club's past was shown to have effectively replaced its actual history. In Ninety-Two in the Shade, McGuane explores another myth: the heroic role which is romantic in its drive to assert the individual as the source of order and meaning. McGuane's protagonist lives in a world without tradition, values or a sense of a past, symbolized by the ineffectuality of fathers. The great fear is of time, a theme which will continue to preoccupy McGuane in later novels, and the hero's compulsion to escape time, to extract himself from the exigencies of history. One way McGuane's heroes escape time is by assuming a style or role which in its ritual purity is detached from history. The inevitably tragic outcome of such a solution and the necessity of integrating the past are clearly revealed in Ninety-Two in the Shade.

Ninety-Two in the Shade is markedly, almost studiously, Hemingwayesque both in its concern with the individual alienated from his society and time, and in the resort to action as an existential antidote to despair. McGuane's

novels address some of the same themes as Hemingway's: the alienation from a society absurdly set on self-destruction and the retreat to nature to face directly in fishing or big game hunting the existential battle between man and nature. McGuane's America, a society rendered increasingly absurd by technology, materialism, and pathological narcissism, invites the same sense of futility as affected Hemingway:

> knowing what a meat cleaver daily history is and how we trend, despite our most luminous acts, steadily toward oblivion.[1]

The novel tackles a more serious theme than his earlier satiric novel, The Sporting Club. This theme centers on the attempt to structure existence in the absence of any profound beliefs. All too conscious of the unrelenting passage of time and what awaits at the end of time, McGuane's heroes yearn for some kind of connection between the past and the present as opposed to the vanity of all flesh. But McGuane's worldview in this novel is close to that of a Hemingway novel in which characters move within a "metaphysical closed system"[2] toward a tragic end. Moreover, McGuane's characters in this novel remain fixed in roles which do not allow them to change or grow.

Both Ernest Hemingway and Thomas McGuane are "searchers for order,"[3] Hemingway in the ideological rubble of post-war Europe and McGuane in the "declining snivelization" of contemporary America. This desire for an established system of values in a world of arbitrariness, violence and death is

a search for values, for a substitute order of reality in which the perfectly ordered rules of fishing and hunting compensate for the lack of a religious or cultural tradition.

In Ninety-Two in the Shade, Tom Skelton is "in extremis," a victim of "internal collapse and loss almost of armature that made it increasingly difficult to so much as sit up straight."[4] At the end of his rope, Tom Skelton has come (symbolically) to the end of the continent, trying to escape "hotcakesland" (p. 53) out on the ocean, knowing he is "going to have to draw some lines" (p. 52) in order to find a way of going on. Abandoning formal study of marine biology, Skelton plans to set up as a fish guide:

> simple survival at one level and the prevention of psychotic lesions based upon empirical observation of the republic depended upon his being able to get out on the ocean. Solitary floating as the tide carried him off the seaward shelf was in one sense sociopathic conduct for him; not infrequently such simplicity was one of three options; the others being berserking and smoking dope all the livelong day. (p. 122)

Skelton wants to turn his back on society and escape to the ocean. As McGuane's ironic description indicates, Skelton is escaping the bureaucratic and excessively complex society for a simpler world of tides, winds, and fish movements.

While both Hemingway and McGuane are concerned with the existential struggle to find meaning in a darkened world, Hemingway's novels are tragic because it seems there is no possibility of restoring what has been lost as a result of the war: the hopes, ideals, and innocent optimism of a

generation.[5] In Hemingway's work, the sense of a civilization degraded beyond repair as a result of the rhetoric of nationalism and militarism that led to World War I, produces a detached view, a refusal of history. The world of Hemingway's novels is a world reduced to pure experience and a refusal of history:[6] a demythologized world.

For McGuane, however, the past is never dead; it is merely unrecovered and haunts the present with ghostly reminders.

One of McGuane's ghosts is clearly Hemingway[7] whose themes and fictional situations are frequently raided and reappear, subtly altered, in McGuane's novels.[8] There is some satire in this treatment of Hemingway's existential themes but more often McGuane's protagonists reveal an alienation from "the age" equally as profound and disturbing as that of Jake Barnes or Nick Adams. For example:

> From the seaward vantage, it was the America you weep for. Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee knee-deep in mobile homes surrounded by the vacant sea. (p. 108)

Successive novels by McGuane document the evolution of his typical hero, an individual radically alienated and searching for an understanding of the past (commonly through the father) which will provide some assurance of continuity between generations and a sense of permanent values. Only with this link can the hero's obsession with death and oblivion abate.

Tom Skelton is an early version of this type of hero. Having returned to Key West barely holding on to reality, he is determined to establish himself as a fish guide. This livelihood, which requires intuition and skill, is for Skelton (as for Hemingway's protagonists) a ritual linked to the enduring ocean and nature as opposed to corrupting society.

Skelton, established in the fuselage he calls home, surrounded by his books, transoceanic radio and imaginary garden, is intent on guiding as the only salvation in sight. Like Nick Adams in "Big Two-Hearted River" or Frederick Henry in A Farewell to Arms, Skelton's determination to guide is an attempt to establish his own "code" of behaviour. Guiding is an occupation impervious to everything but the demands of ebb and flow tides, and the movement of fish. Within the ordered ritual of fishing, the individual skill becomes the only ground for value and identity. This existential freedom liberates Skelton for a short time, at least, from his awareness of urban blight, family entanglements, and general despair.

For Skelton there is something unprofaned about the ocean, a feeling connected to the symmetry of the flats and keys and the professionalism required to navigate them from memory:

> Skelton by painful and slow process knew very well how to run the country having slept out in mosquito bogs for his misjudgments. He had poled the better parts of full days upwind and up tide with bent drive shafts and

> wiped-out propellers for having had on the map of his brain previously unlocated coral heads or discarded ice cans from commercial boats; or for having lost surge channels in the glare crossing shallow reefs. (p. 13)

Escaping the "globe of his own hallucinatory despair" (p. 3) Skelton finds the fishing a kind of rite, a ceremony in which knowledge and skill and intuition permit him to identify for a moment with the ancient and subterranean order of the ocean.

The typical Hemingway hero establishes a surrogate source of order in sports such as fishing and hunting, in careful knowledge of the rituals of the bullfight, boxing, horseracing and others, as well as in the formalized violence of war. For the Hemingway hero, survival depends on finding an order in the world, a code of behaviour concerned with honour, loyalty, and courage which offers stability in a war-torn world. Out of this code, the only morality is that which feels good or bad afterwards.

Ninety-Two in the Shade, without a doubt, explores Hemingway territory. Like Hemingway's heroes, Tom Skelton feels the absence of a meaningful tradition, and is driven to search for the "code," the role, the almost mystical ritual which will bring order to his life. He feels the immense emptiness of his existence: "'Miranda honey, look here," he says to his girlfriend, "all of us . . . are just free people looking to be prisoners, hoping for a quiet cell, a toothbrush and a washcloth; but we are the convicts of freedom.'" (p. 107) Unable to make any meaningful

connections between himself and his father or grandfather, between his past and his future, Skelton is merely following his instincts when he decides to guide. By mastering the difficult and precise skills of fish guiding, Skelton hopes to escape the present with its degraded morality and forge a link to a more solid sea-faring tradition:

> It had taken a quarter of a century to produce the combination for him: access to the space of ocean (and the mode of livelihood that would make that access constant) and an unformed vision of how he ought to live on earth with others. (p. 122)

"'I have got to get this skiff,'" he tells Miranda, "'It's the only thing I can do half right. It's as simple as that.'" (p. 93)

Only one thing bars Skelton's ambitions to guide: Nichol Dance's threat to kill him if he does so. Nichol Dance is one of two established fishing guides out of Key West, the other being Faron Carter. Though their fishing styles are opposite, both men are successful guides and Skelton's own pattern is modelled on theirs, because "theirs were the styles that there were" (p. 7):

> Now Carter was a level person who presented certain civic virtues that could not be ascribed to Dance. . . . Dance would brood about the tide or lose his temper or, much the worst, begin drinking. The two men were similarly successful as guides over the long haul. Day after day, Carter put a sound amount of fish on the dock. While Dance, the incessant addict of long shots, would sometimes blank out entirely, coming home in an empty skiff black in the face; but on his best days he would produce fish in quantities incomprehensible to Carter. Skelton favored Dance. (p. 7)

Actually Tom Skelton and Nichol Dance have much in common. Both have come to Key West headed for the ocean as a place to start over, and both men regard fishing as an essential component of their lifestyles. In addition, both men have been on the "extremer voyages of the spirit" toward madness. In years past, Dance shot and killed an exercise boy in Kentucky under vague circumstances and now drinks himself half to death in excessive bouts with the bottle. Skelton too is on the run from that "tremulous threshold where another breath is a matter for decision." (p. 21) Essentially, for both men, fishing is an escape, the only other escape being death. If he weren't a skilled guide, Nichol Dance knows he would be "just a displaced bumpkin run out of his own unmortgaged bar" (p. 12) and Skelton likewise knows that fishing is his only "way of going on." (p. 6)

The confrontation between the two men sets up the major conflict in the novel and foreshadows the inevitable tragic climax. These characters are obsessed with their individual aims; neither one can compromise. With all the rigidity of Greek tragic heroes, they are doomed to act out their destiny. Nichol Dance cannot allow Skelton to threaten his superior position as a guide because such competition would destroy his credibility. Inside, he knows that

> <u>One thing no one could ever make me do . . . is start over. I would listen to all the resurrection plans anyone had for me. But starting over is out of the question.</u> (p. 100)

Only Dance's former guiding career stands between his present reputation and his turbulent past. Unable to resign himself to any opposition, he is fully prepared to kill Skelton if necessary. "I will do what I have to," he says to himself, "I'm all I've got, in a manner of speaking." (p. 133)

Skelton is equally determined to guide. Like Manuel in Hemingway's short story "The Undefeated," or Santiago in The Old Man and the Sea, who refuse to give up even in the face of death, Skelton's instinct to guide is irrefutable, his only lifeline. As he tells Miranda: "'When you realize that everyone dies, you become a terrible kind of purist.'" (p. 22)

Therefore, he sets about ordering his skiff with all the attention to the subtle intricacies of boats and gear typical of one of Hemingway's heroes. Skelton lovingly attends to every detail of the ritual from the study of Bohlke's Fishes of the Bahamas and Field Notes on the Physiology of Marine Invertebrates (p. 24) to the exact specifications on his new skiff:

> "'three hatches with interconnected waterways routed in a taper so they drain to the sump. . . and all hardware flush-mounted to a drive fit. . . and maybe a half inch overhang above that aft bulkhead.'" (p. 80)

Skelton's creed is "Yes, gentlemen, there's next to nothing; but I'm going to have fun anyway." (p. 76), an obvious echo of Hemingway. His fateful collision with Nichol Dance seems inevitable:

> The future cast a bright and luminous shadow over Thomas Skelton's fragmented past; for Dance, it was the past that cast the shadow. Both men were equally prey to mirages. Thomas Skelton required a sense of mortality; and, ironically, it was Nichol Dance who was giving it to him; for Skelton understood perfectly well that there was a chance, however small, that Nichol Dance would kill him. (p. 89)

Both Dance and Skelton have names which suggest the "danse macabre," the medieval dance of death that could lead a living person to his death.[9] The novel is structured around this telling image as the two figures move toward and away from each other, leading inexorably to a final engagement.

Skelton needs a sense of impending danger in order to feel that his existence matters. This illustrates a common theme in McGuane's work up to Panama: the individual desire for heroism as a means to transcend his mortality. In addition to Skelton, Vernor Stanton in The Sporting Club and Chet Pomeroy in Panama attempt to defy death through such immortality. For Skelton, the gamble makes him feel he really is alive.

For Hemingway, the past is frequently another country, a world severed from the present by the intervening nightmare of the war. Often in his novels, the characters do not speak of the past. For McGuane, however, the past is not dead, only lost, a function of severed connections. In Ninety-Two in the Shade, Skelton's past is symbolically expressed through his father and grandfather. Eventually Skelton begins to realize that behind his decision to guide

is the influence of previous generations of sea-farers in his family:

> was there a connection between himself and these two male forebears? And if there was, what was he being steered toward?. . . . He could not escape the suspicion that this association of boats--cruiser, rumrunner, skiff--implied something sequential. (pp. 112-113)

Skelton's grandfather, Goldsboro Skelton, is an aging, imperious racketeer, "revered unseen and unmet as only a crook of limitless cynicism can be revered." (p. 32) Son of the last important Key West wrecking master, Goldsboro is a renowned figure in Key West society, a political manipulator who made his fortune through a lifetime of defying the authority of captains, courts, and government. Over the years, through various ventures, Goldsboro has gained a great deal of influence by adeptly manipulating the gaps of control in business and politics for his own benefit.

As McGuane intends, Skelton's conversation with his father at the end of the novel illuminates the relationship between father and son. Skelton finds that he is not so different from his father, in his dedication to "'ordeals as a way of driving your spirit to the place where its first confusions are.'" (p. 169) Skelton's insistence on guiding is a matter of princple to him just as his father's pursuits of shrimping, blimping, and pimping are part of his own odd search for meaning and value.

Both Skelton's father and his grandfather have confronted in their individual ways the problem of existence

against sure knowledge of death. Goldsboro's youthful clubbing of an evangelical wrecking master and takeover of the vessel was the prelude to a life of aggressive self-aggrandizement. His son's life was a rebellion against such dubious achievement and a purposeful retreat to the appearance of insanity. As he speaks to his father, Skelton sees that same "turbulent gaze into emptiness" which is his own "birthright." (p. 171) He asks him: "'What would you do in my place?"' and his father responds: "'I'd go through with it.'" (p. 173) Like the pathetic symbol of the helium balloon trapped inside the Southernmost Blimp Works, Skelton's father is flawed by his insistent follies; clearly he has no lessons to teach his son.

Unable to see what he could have learned from his grandfather and father's lives, Skelton cannot feel any connection to them:

> He could no longer synthesize the life of his father, his grandfather, and himself; he realized now, however that that was something he had been trying to do all along. (p. 104)

Therefore, Skelton heads toward confrontation with Dance in an inevitable arc of tragedy.

He is killed by Dance after successfully hooking a trophy bonefish for the tourist, Olie Slatt, acting according to his convictions and the image of himself as fish guide that was stronger than the reality. Nichol Dance is clubbed to death by Olie Slatt, also for his convictions. Skelton dies because he cannot find himself in a changing

world; both he and Dance are caught in an outdated game of honour. In the absence of any connection to the past, Skelton is forced to rely on a code to sustain him but McGuane's point is that such beliefs cannot ultimately respond to a changing world. The necessity of considering the past as an important influence on the present will become a preoccupation in McGuane's later novels.

Even the final pages of Ninety-Two in the Shade show McGuane moving beyond the purely existential world of Hemingway's novels toward recognition of the past as a shaping force in the hero's personal identity. In future novels, McGuane will explore the symbolic importance of the past in terms of both individual and cultural self-perception.

Notes - Chapter Two

[1] Thomas McGuane, Panama (1978; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1980), pp. 169-170.

[2] Albert Howard Carter III, "McGuane's First Three Novels: Games, Fun, Nemesis," Critique, 17, 3 (1975), 60.

[3] From a sentence by Hemingway: "The searchers for order will find that there is a certain order in the acceptance of experience." Carlos Baker, ed., Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters 1917-1961 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981), p. 492.

[4] Thomas McGuane, Ninety-Two in the Shade (1973; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1980), p. 3. Further references cited by page number within the text.

[5] The frequent maiming or injury of Hemingway's heroes symbolizes this loss.

[6] By this I mean the sense of being able to say everything and nothing with words.

[7] McGuane's own life is startingly reminiscent of Hemingway's. Born in Michigan, both men lived in Key West as writers and expert fishermen. McGuane's best friend in Florida was Guy de al Valdene whose father was a close companion to Hemingway. McGuane's love of hunting and

shooting birds led him out West to Montana; Hemingway kept a hunting lodge in Idaho where he was living at the time of his death. There is no record, however, of Hemingway conquering the rodeo circuit as McGuane did with his roping prize.

[8] The fishing trip with the Rudleighs is remarkably similar to that of Nick Adams in "Big Two-Hearted River II." The episode of the Rudleighs in the New York outfitting store, Abercrombie & Fitch, "the great brown store," could have been lifted from Lillian Ross' portrait of an aging Hemingway published in the New Yorker in 1957.

[9] Carter, p. 57. Carter sees the name Nichol Dance as connected to the "danse macabre"; however he does not mention Skelton's allusive name.

The past is not dead. It's not even past.
William Faulkner, Requiem for a Nun.

CHAPTER THREE

PANAMA

Thomas McGuane's fourth novel, Panama, was published in 1978, five years after his last novel, Ninety-Two in the Shade. In an interview given to the Miami Herald as he embarked upon the novel, McGuane predicted this long gestation period:

> It's going to be very intricate thematically, and it's going to take a long time to do. So a shorthand way of saying that is to say I'm starting a long novel. If I say I'm starting a short novel and it's going to take four years, people don't understand.[1]

In Panama, McGuane begins to mine the thematic vein he had only groped toward in his earlier novels, that is, the continuity between the past and the present and the complex web of connections through which the past is always resurrected in the present and guides the future. For McGuane the present is woven into the past in a continuity of pattern. If the strand is snipped and the connection severed, the pattern becomes meaningless and the unity of the whole disappears.

In Ninety-Two in the Shade, Tom Skelton struggled to impose a kind of Hemingwayesque order and pattern on his existence by taking up the demanding and ritualized pursuit of skiff guiding. Without family or societal bonds, the fishing was an escape to the pure and ordered routine of

fish migrations and tides. However, Skelton's attempt to evade the strands of family and responsibility was a flight into a tragic fate; stranded in a predetermined tragic universe, Tom was unable or unwilling to halt the sequence of events he had begun. Locked in opposition with Faron Carter over the guiding, Tom moved toward the death he could not escape.

In Panama, McGuane begins to move away from this stark and rather bleak view of existence toward a more archetypal conception of America and its history, that is of "some primitive or typical, recurrent pattern of human behaviour, found both in the literature and life. . . ."[2] This includes a change in the consciousness of time. In primitive societies, relics of the past are incorporated into the present, historical events are woven into myth, and the creep of linear time gives way to a circular continuous notion of time passing.[3] Thus events occur not singly but as part of a continuum in which men's actions recur, drawing together the past and the present.

Increasingly in Panama and the novels that follow, McGuane locates the source of modern anomie and alienation in the individual's displacement from a tradition, from his history. The conviction that there are real connections between the past and the present, that the past does not cease to exist but shapes the nature of what is to come, emerges as a prominent theme in McGuane's later fiction. Many of the concerns common to twentieth-century literature,

such as the arbitrariness of events in an indifferent cosmos, the isolation of the individual, and the inevitability of death continue to afflict McGuane's protagonists. But the Hemingway "code" as a means of going on in the face of nothing is exchanged for a search to reintegrate the individual with his past. Although he denies that the past can influence him, raging at his father: "'Telling me goddamn you that I can't proceed without knowing where I've been,'"[4] it is not until he accepts his family and history that Chet Pomeroy in Panama is able to discover his identity and place in the world.

McGuane's prediction that Panama would be intricate in terms of theme was accurate. The motifs of memory, the past, the father, ghosts, resurrection, and bridges or connections wind through the novel, eventually weaving themselves into a form which imitates the structure of myth, the sequence of sacrifice, death, and ultimately rebirth and the restoration of life and meaning. In this chapter, I will show how Chet Pomeroy emerges from a living death of narcissism and obsession with an imaginary past, personified in Jesse James, to struggle toward an acceptance of his true history. Again, McGuane shows that legend and tradition are destructive if they replace one's real past.

The Time Out of Joint

The novel begins with the words: "This is the first time I've worked without a net. I want to tell the truth."

(p. 3) The confessor is Chestor Hunnicut Pomeroy, who has abandoned his showbiz past and come home to Key West as a failed star and already a has-been. This novel marks the first time McGuane has used the first person point of view in his novels. This autobiographical stance is appropriate for telling Chet's story because the reader is drawn into his mind while simultaneously remaining alerted to the limitations of his perceptions and the extreme narcissistic viewpoint from which he judges the world. The narrator is not reliable; his version of reality, like his showbiz persona, is inventive and extravagant.

Restricting the narrative to Chet's schizophrenic point of view, McGuane presents an America which seems threatening, hallucinatory, and surreal. he reader finds himself identifying with Chet and therefore disoriented. We undergo the same gaps in time and the same delusions that Chet experiences in his journey toward reality. McGuane emphasizes the demented nature of Chet's mind through abrupt transitions, jerky dialogue, and the merging of fantasy and reality.

Chet's theatrical past is not clear; he seems to have combined rock and roll stardom with such bizarre feats as climbing out of an elephant to sword-fighting a pitching machine. It is apparent that his former life was a wild circus of exhibitionism and Las Vegas style entertainment:

> I was making a tremendous living demonstrating with the aplomb of a Fuller Brush salesman, all the nightmares, all the loathsome, toppling states of mind, all the

> evil things that go on behind closed eyes. When I crawled out of the elephant's ass, it was widely felt I'd gone too far; and when I puked on the mayor, that was it, I was through. (p. 154)

Chet represents what McGuane sees as the sickness in contemporary American society: the cult of personality, the preoccupation with image, the desire for vulgar sensation and newness as a palliative for the essential emptiness and superficiality of one's own life. The movies express the new American dream, a fantasy of physical beauty and heroic individualism taking place in an eternal present where the reality of change, loss, and death never intrudes. It is no accident that Chet is connected to the movie industry through such productions as "The Dog Ate the Part We Didn't Like" and "Chronicles of a Depraved Pervert." The movies are the extreme expression of America's pathological narcissism, where spectacle is the predominant form of cultural display, a production and consumption of images which substitutes for the sense of a shared history and tradition.

The Key West that greets Chet when he arrives home is like the protagonist himself, degraded. As the novel opens, the city commissioner and other officials have just been arrested for operating an illegal lottery--the bolita, and the general tone is one of defeat and decay:

> Out on the patio, I could see the horizon. The dog slept in the wedge of sun. There were no boats, the sea was flat, and from here, there was not a bit of the coordinated raids, the unmarked cars. . . . And behind the wooden shutters, there was as much cocaine as ever. I had a pile of scandal magazines to see what had hit

> friends and loved ones. There was not one boat between me and an unemphatic horizon. I was home from the field of agony or whatever you want to call it; I was home from it. I was dead. (p. 4)

Why does Chet return to Key West? He seems preoccupied with his family background, and his old girlfriend, Catherine. On the verge of collapse, Chet has come home with a compulsion to retrace his past and find some purpose and meaning to his existence. Key West is the most unlikely of retreats since it is comprised mainly of "whores, junkies, and Southern lawyers," (p. 7) but it's home.

It soon becomes clear that Panama is McGuane's portrait of a culture in decline. In fact, McGuane presents Key West as a microcosm of the cultural crisis of America. Everyone in Key West seems to be getting by on drugs, sex, or violence; there are unseen menaces at every turn and even the police are threatening. Key West is a significant setting located as it is at the extreme end of the continent, and McGuane describes it as decaying: "the grapefruits were rotting in the little grove . . . the bent grass was thick and spongy and neglected." (p. 4)

In many ways, Chet's society conforms to the "culture of narcissism" described by Christopher Lasch who observes the signs of pathological narcissism in modern America's "fascination with fame and celebrity, . . . the shallowness and transitory quality of personal relations, and the horror of death."[5] As Chet says: "The worse the dream, the more demonstrative you must become." (p. 89) The novel abounds

with instances of shallow relationships in which the parties involved never connect emotionally. Marcelline especially, with her painted face and beribboned hair seems to cultivate relationships as numerous as the rings on her fingers. Emotional commitment, however, seems as impossible between Marcelline and her boyfriends as it does for everyone else in the novel, including Chet and Catherine. The sunbathers whom Chet overhears talking on the beach are typical:

> "Scarred for life . . ."
> "Not excited . . ."
> ". . . nothing personal between us."
> "Girl is getting me down. [I spoke to her of] . . . Rasputin, the Kalahari, the telegraphy of souls and ocean. All she wants to do is sixty-nine." (p. 106)

More immediate, however, is the disintegration and loss within Chet's own world. Chet's mother and his brother, Jim, are dead and Chet refuses to accept that his father is not dead too. The family scenario is Faulknerian in its descent from days of glory to degradation; Chet says: "See, in Key West, we were an old family that had lost its money . . ." (p. 45) The decline from a glamourous ship-building family that once built "coasters, trading smacks, sharpie mail-boats . . . and blockade runners" (p. 11) for the Confederacy in the Civil War and "had houses with pecan wood dining-room tables, crazy chandeliers, and dogwood joists pinned like the ribs of ships" (p. 12) to bankruptcy in the Depression and finally a "dull, stupid drunk" (p. 12) grandfather is a fall through time. Now Chet is a helpless witness to one final degradation as his stepmother, Roxy,

prepares to sell the family shipyard to Curtis V. Peavey, a local real estate dealer, as the site for a new Holiday Inn.

Like Quentin Compson in The Sound and the Fury, Chet feels himself to be the last doomed remnant of his family which has been blighted with death like the first-born of the Egyptians. What Chet would really like is to halt the decline and stop time since he sees only too well "what a meat cleaver daily history is and how we trend, despite our most luminous acts, steadily toward oblivion." (pp. 169-170)

The decline of Chet's family fortunes suggests McGuane's view of America as a nation which has forgotten its heroic origins and replaced its ideals of honour and freedom with commercial greed and bourgeois vulgarity. Chet's isolation from the world around him ("I am enclosed in here, in my reflecto Ray Bans. Look at me and what do you see? Yourself." [p. 159]) represents the entrapment of the individual in the present. Chet speaks for all those who likewise feel the loss of the continuity and coherence that a sense of history and custom can provide:

> All of us passengers were torn from our origins . . . beneath us my little America, my baby madhouse, deployed towns and cities against the icy ruinous transept of time and the awful thing which awaits it. (p. 155)

The severance of ties that link the past and the present results in a disconnection from one's origins that is like death. Chet hints of this death in himself:

> I am in all respects the replica of an effective bright-mouthed coastal omnivore . . . who . . . teeth glittering with light like broken minerals, could be dead; could be the kind of corpse that is sometimes described as "fresh". (p. 8)

The death that Chet senses all around him is the nothingness of a society without context. Chet feels only the disintegration of things: Key West, Roxy slowly falling into the hands of Peavey, imbibing alcohol and pills with increasing speed, Catherine deserting him for a new lover, and the general malaise of every aspect of life. But Chet's sense of inevitable doom is related to his fear of time and the oblivion that waits at the end of it:

> "I'd like to point out my inability to stand having nothing that began long ago . . . . We have no money, enemies at every turn, nuns haunting my house, evaporating lists of friends, the dark, family dead, and dead this and dead that and killing everything and killing time---" (p. 59, my emphasis)

Time is the dimension of motion and change and it is time (and therefore death) that Chet wants to stop. The progress of time is a constant reminder of the ongoing process of decline within his family, the gulf between the heroic past and the present, and the final punctuation of death which hovers. The death of his brother, Jim, is a pivotal moment for Chet. At the ghastly memory of his brother suffocating on a plastic mattress in a mental asylum, Chet experiences the full horror of his family's doom which time has brought him to. Like Quentin smashing his wristwatch, time stops for Chet and he rejects the idea of a possible future:

> I last saw my brother Jim at a mental hospital where he had a small, decent room with a poster of me on the wall . . . . We had a long talk about our mother and father. . . . Then I flew to Stockholm to do a show. Jim was due out of the bin in three days. A week later, full of morphine, he smothered to death on a plastic-covered mattress. (p. 45)

Although it was Jim who died on the day of the Boston subway fire, Chet insists that it was his father. Because the concept of father implies a continuing movement forward into history (and death), Chet begins to deny his father's existence and to locate himself in the changeless past. He invents a new family history: "'My father led a long and heroic life at sea and died ironically in a tunnel under the city of Boston instead of at the helm of a schooner. . . .'" (p. 142)

The Ideal Past

Chet desires to link his lineage to Jesse James, the Missouri outlaw whose daring train robberies and ability to escape capture gained him legendary status in American history:

> I stand for those who have made themselves up.
> I am directly related to Jesse James. That is true. We were out of Excelsior Springs, Missouri, and hid him in our barn more than once. I have played in that barn, and in fact, it is within the gloomy space beyond the hay mow where Jesse James is supposed to have hung upside down, with his percussion Colts in his trousers. (p. 85)

As a cultural hero, Jesse James is static, fixed, immortal and therefore immune to change and death. Contrasted with the banality and vulgarity of the present

with its perverted love and drug mentality, the past seems heroic and unified to Chet. Chet's desire for the past is a nostalgia for a mythical time more nearly perfect than the present. Jesse James functions as a cultural hero through whom he can escape the profane present and connect himself to a "sacred," heroic past.

Chet's fantasies about his connection to Jesse James extend metaphorically to what McGuane senses is a collective yearning within the American nation for a connection to the people, places, and heroic events of its history. Chet's desire for a return to a more heroic time parallels the nostalgia for origins which McGuane perceives underlying the psychoses of modern society: anomie, random violence, and the constant search for sensation. This belief is expressed in the foreword McGuane wrote for a collection of Western photographs:

> The West, whatever that is, is still there, believe it or not, in its entirety. It is the leading chimera of our geography. The dead windmills lost behind the high wire of a missile range, the stove-up old cowboy at the unemployment office, the interstate that plunges through the homesteads, all bring aches to an American race memory. . . . No matter how thoroughly the vestigial society of a nearly open range is expelled, the world to come in this tremendous landscape will be shaped forever in memories, in legend, and in that transubstantial belief that one has been preceded by men in whom the sense of glory was not entirely diminished.[6]

It is significant, however, that in Panama, Chet sympathizes with the myth of Jesse James rather than with the historical person. The actual Jesse James was a member of one of the numerous guerilla bands that sprang up at the

outset of the Civil War. Jesse's brother Frank rode with the notorious Colonel W.C. Quantrill's band and the groups had a reputation for good marksmanship, daring, violence but, in fact, no special allegiance to one side or the other; robbing, looting, and killing were for these men the best way to make a living. As one historian describes it:

> The American Civil War, as all wars, bred crime and criminals and out of its dislocations grew a wave of lawlessness that through successive generations perpetuated itself in a dynasty of outlaws.[7]

At the end of the war, Jesse James was reportedly shot while under a flag of truce. According to the legend, it was his sense of injury at this act that induced him to take up a life of crime:

> He thereafter turned to a life of crime, being declared an outlaw in 1866. He became leader of the James gang, which systematically robbed, plundered, and murdered, specializing in bank holdups and initiating the art of a train robbery. The bandits . . . bragged that they never robbed a friend, a preacher, a Southerner, or a widow.[8]

The Jesse James with whom Chet identifies is this romantic hero, the victim of an unforgiving North:

> To the Missouri Ozark people, James emerged as a romantic figure, hounded into a life of crime by authorities who never forgave his allegiance to the South.[9]

Chet can identify with Jesse, an individual excluded from society, because he feels victimized himself. Soon, however, Chet's identification with Jesse becomes so obsessive that images of Jesse merge with Chet's own self-concept and the fantasy overtakes Chet's real life.

Chet's denial of his father and adulation of Jesse James is his way of abdicating the struggle with the imperfections of the present, much as Skelton took to the ocean in Ninety-Two in the Shade. Chet locates truth in the past, in a time "while there were still things to be said." (p. 84) His desire for the past is a nostalgia for a mythical time more perfect than the present.

In Panama, McGuane explores again the theme that is central to his novels: time and the individual's relation to his environment as he moves from the past toward the future. McGuane is preoccupied with the meaning of history and the way the past shapes the present.

This is the predominant theme in William Faulkner's novels. Faulkner's influence on McGuane's later novels is as pronounced as Hemingway's was on McGuane's early work. McGuane sees the West as similar to the South in its nostalgia for a lost tradition and the coherence of that world. However, he also realizes, as Faulkner did about the South, that as the reality of the Old West disappeared, it reappeared as a myth:

> The demolition of the agrarian South by the industrial North in the Civil War was a precursor with similar power to generate ghosts, and to haunt with a mythology of disappearance.[10]

Panama's themes are close to those of The Sound and the Fury or Absalom, Absalom!, that is, the present in flux versus the still past which has been mythicized, ordered, and rendered timeless. Quentin Compson in The Sound and the

Fury, haunted by the glorious ghosts of the Civil War and the chivalric Southern tradition his family has fallen from, is obsessed with the past as an escape from the death-dealing corruption of time. In Panama, Chet is similarly possessed. Racked by the decline of his family and the sordid reality of the present which reaches a climax in the death of his innocent and trusting brother, Jim, Chet's dream of Jesse is an attempt to stop time and freeze it forever in Jesse's heroic age.

Chet refuses to admit that Jesse James is dead. Don, the detective whom Catherine hired to assist Chet in recalling his past, argues with him to no avail:

> "Jesse James has been dead for a century, mister. He was shot by Bob Ford whilst attempting to hang a picture."
>
> "Never happened."
>
> "I'm telling you---"
>
> I had to shout." Bob Ford never got it done. . . ."
>
> Jesse, forgive them, for they know not what they do. (pp. 150-151)

In this way, Panama moves between the two poles of static ideal mythology represented by Jesse James and dynamic ongoing life which requires that Chet locate himself in a world which admits his father. Until then Chet is a prisoner of his own myth. McGuane shows Chet locked in his obsession with Jesse in the same way that Skelton could not escape the "code" that he relied on to endure his existence.

The burden of the past is a theme which Faulkner explored extensively in his writing. He once remarked that he was "inclined to think that the only peace man knows is--he says, Why good gracious, yesterday I was happy. . . . Maybe peace is not is, but was."[11] In this sense, Eden is an imaginary past state and man's fall from Eden the inevitable result of the motion of life:

> To try to restore such an imaginary past condition is to try to destory creation, which is not a condition or a state but a process. To deny the fall, then, is to deny life itself. . . .[12]

The Dead Father

The process of coming to terms with our history is an important issue in Panama and a continuing preoccupation in McGuane's later novels. McGuane believes that a nation has its symbolic being in its history. The modern loss of a tradition is, to McGuane, what others might term the loss of religion or spirituality or confidence. No matter what one chooses to call it, the phenomenon is marked by a feeling of absence, that a recurrent theme or pattern has been lost. Without this memory, the identity of the individual and the culture are fragmented and lost. Panama maps out the territory of loss, the disappearance of a way of life that once, and for a long time, had meaning and now has given way to a less coherent world of hotel chains, commercial franchises, movie agents, and interstate highways. Chet feels this loss in terms of his own identity:

> When they build a shopping center over an old salt marsh, the seabirds sometimes circle the same place for a year or more, coming back to check daily, to see if there isn't some little chance those department stores and pharmacies and cinemas won't go as quickly as they'd come. Similarly, I come back and keep looking into myself, and it's always steel, concrete, fan magazines, machinery, bubble gum; nothing as sweet as the original marsh. Catherine knows this without looking, knows that the loving child who seems lost behind the reflector Ray-Bans, perhaps or probably really is lost. (p. 8)

Identity is the individual's ability to experience himself as someone who has continuity and sameness.[13] Unable to connect emotionally with anyone around him, apart from Catharine, Chet cannot determine the boundaries of his physical and mental self sufficiently to establish an identity. His showbiz career was a "burst . . . of creating the world in my own image. I removed all resistance until I floated in my own invention." (p. 6) Unable to locate the real Chet, he latches on to Jesse James, an individual with roots in a time when he believes a man's identity was clear-cut and unambiguous. What Chet desires is

> something as simple as to ache in the literal heart and chest for all of us who had lost ourselves as parents lose children, to the horizon which is finally only overtaken in remorse and death. (p. 43)

The repeated use of the father symbol expresses McGuane's preoccupation with origins, with the people, places, and events that shaped the present and continue to influence the identity of modern society through tradition and memory. In our beginnings, McGuane believes, lie important truths about ourselves. Thus a culture looks to its history for a validation of its beliefs in the same way

that a son looks to a father for an image of himself. Chet's attempt to attach his own past to the romantic history of Jesse James is an attempt to connect once more to the heroic legacy which he feels lying dormant beneath the taco stands and moped rentals. The distinction between a great past and an inglorious present is similar to that made by Mr. Compson in Faulkner's novel, Absalom, Absalom!, between the once proud men of the Sutpen family as opposed to their descendants. The former were:

> People too as we are and victims too as we are, but victims of a different circumstance, simpler and therefore, integer for integer, larger, more heroic and the figures therefore more heroic too, not dwarfed and involved but distinct, uncomplex who had the gift of living once or dying once instead of being diffused and scattered creatures drawn blindly from a grab bag and assembled.[14]

Chet's statement about his father is noticeably similar in sentiment:

> My father is dead and he wasn't any help to me anyway; but he was the only one I had and so at night I walk around and think I'm talking to him because he came from some place and was born in a certain year, as always, while there were still things to be said. (p. 84)

Chet believes his father to have lived in a more heroic time, unlike the futility of his own time.

The mystery of Chet's identity is locked up in the absent father, the man he refuses to admit exists. Chet offers several accounts of his father's life which variously place him as a store detective, a snack food manufacturer, and the captain of a schooner. But without exception, Chet

insists that his father died in the Boston subway fire. As Catherine argues with him:

> "Your father said to me that he should have never left you with the nuns. He should have handled things himself. He said that he let too many others do the things he should have done himself. He said he injured you and he wants a chance to make up for it."
>
> "I was just another snack to him and now he's gone."
>
> "He's not gone, Chet, you have to go back and repair these holes. You're not getting anywhere." (pp. 72-73)

McGuane sees modern America, like Chet, as having been deprived of its history by the rapid encroachment of industry, commerce, and urban homogenization. A myth or a memory can be more real than its model as Chet's belief in Jesse proves. Chet's fixation on the legendary hero reveals the dark side of myth; the dream of a heroic past can cripple the present and block the forward movement of life. The trick is to recognize one's history without mythologizing it out of recognizability.

Connections

In Panama one feels the power of quest. Chet's world is desolate with ghosts: his father, his brother, and his grandfather. McGuane sees America haunted by the same ghosts from the past. The problem, McGuane implies, is akin to children rummaging through their grandparents' abandoned homes: "It's not so much the trunks and old newspapers as it is the suspicion that the old people may still be alive, that what is lost is the connection."[15] The true quest,

therefore, is not merely to preserve the past in amber but "to build a bridge that goes in two directions,"[16] that is, between the past and the present. Although the past fades, as fathers die, its significance lives on.

The bridge going in two directions implies a continuity between the past and the present. The quest to find this connection between father and son becomes the primary theme of the last half of Panama. McGuane's use of images of connection such as bridges, ghosts (linking the past and the present), and skeletons (linking the dead and the living) signifies Chet's arduous traverse from isolation to acceptance and belonging.

At first Chet refuses even to recognise his father, calling him a "stranger" and an "imposter" (p. 100) but significantly, as the novel progresses, the images of Jesse James and his father and grandfather begin to merge.

For example this occurs when Chet asks Catherine to go with him up to No Name Key. There is a sense of immanence in the air; as they are leaving Chet thinks he sees the figure he calls Jesse James watching from across the street and he remarks on the "queer noise of eternity in the air." (p. 109) The ghostly figure of an old man in a white shirt flashes by in the dark. McGuane uses contrasting images of light and dark to represent the forces of life and death which Chet must choose between.

> We walked to the middle of the bridge. . . . When I looked down at the water, it was the darkest part of the night. It showed silver against the abutments or you couldn't have seen it; it could have been the drop-off, the edge of the world. (pp. 111-112)

Chet associates the figure of the old man with death:

> Oh, God, Oh ghosts, all on threads in the dark, not to be spoken to. Catherine, don't make me see this. Catherine, don't make me see this. There are stains, seeps, things you do not see. (p. 112)

In the dark, in the middle of the bridge, Chet is being forced towards a choice he is afraid of. The mysterious figure of the old man is unrecognized by either one of them: "'I wonder who that old man was?'" Catherine asks, "'he seemed to stare at everything. He was staring at me. He knew everything and he was staring.'" (p. 113)

When Catherine climbs up on the railing and jumps off the bridge, she is forcing Chet to face his fear of death:

> I ran across the bridge to the shore. I couldn't see anything and I broke my way along the mangroves down tide from the bridge and listened. The light through the leaves was like candle flames. I couldn't see anything . . . and I felt everything sweeping toward something where there was no light. . . . Then there was a muddy indentation of shore where the tide whispered past.
>
> Catherine was lying there and the old man in the white shirt was arranging her hair like a sunburst. . . . She said, "Are we alive?" (p. 119)

Later, Chet dreams again and again of the old man on No Name Key and discovers that he does indeed know his name: "Two dreams out of three he was faceless; in the third, he was my father." (p. 119)

With this recognition of his father, Chet begins to break loose from the spectres that haunt him, moving from

the darkness of his hallucinations towards the light of real life. In crossing this bridge, the myth of Jesse recedes, freeing Chet to see the connection between his family history and the larger legend of America which is his cultural inheritance. Instead of a bleak sense of history as a linear stretch of time ending in death, McGuane substitutes a cyclical view of life in terms of birth, death, and return, in spirit if not in body, in legend if not in reality.

The primary movement in Panama involves Chet's passage from alienated fantasy to a reconnection with his father and symbolically with his past. McGuane conveys Chet's gradual relinquishment of the Jesse myth through the progressive blurring in Chet's mind of Jesse, his real father, and grandfather. When Chet swims out to the white yacht docked just offshore and said to be his father's, he identifies the voice he hears as that of Jesse James. When he gets to the stern of the S.S. Snack, however, he sees the man he dreamed was his father holding something belonging to his grandfather:

> It was the old man on No Name Key whom I had discovered arranging Catherine's hair on the mud. He had the cane from my grandfather's scabbard and he worked it between his two hands as he stared down, down, at me suspended in a warm ocean. (p. 148)

In this merging of fantasy and reality, McGuane shows Chet's inner and outer worlds beginning to merge; it only remains for Chet to make the connection.

In Panama McGuane suggests that modern America must forge the same connections between the dead and the living, drawing on the past for a sense of the nation's spirit. When Marcelline and her boyfriend approach Chet at his stepmother's wedding and offer to sell him the disinterred remains of one of his ancestors, Lieutenant Pomeroy, it is a decisive moment for Chet. Pomeroy was a native of Key West who fought the pirates two hundred years ago. McGuane uses the shocking image of the bones to force Chet to look at the fact of death. What remains is a pile of bones but what lives on is the sum of a man's actions, the "daring deeds of valor against the enemy of fiends during his lifetime." (p. vi) The power of memory and legend overcome the oblivion of death. McGuane's striking image of the sack of bones juxtaposed with the wedding celebrations, symbolizes the power of life over death. The influence of the past is through the continuation of values and beliefs which have not been destroyed by time.

Gradually Chet begins to see himself as part of a tradition.

Chet's resolution of the haunting traces of the past comes about when he no longer needs to link Jesse James, the legend, with his personal past, that is, when he can distinguish between the symbol and the thing symbolized. Legends and stories of the past are not dead; they are real voices in shaping perceptions and views alongside the individual's own experience, background, and time.

It is with this knowledge that Chet gains the assurance to name his father:

> At twelve o'clock Jesse came, a cane in the scabbard, his years at sea, the difficulties with the smokey subways of Boston behind him. . . .
> "You know who I am," he said quietly. "Can't you say hello?"
> When I was young, we used to dive into the swimming pool from the highest board on moonless nights, without looking to see if there was water in the pool, knowing that it was emptied twice a month. I felt the same blind arc through darkness when I spoke to my father. He just watched me say the word and after that either of us could go, knowing there was more to be said and time to say it. (pp. 174-175)

In calling his father by name, Chet escapes his fantasy and emerges into his own place in history. To name is to create and in naming his father, Chet acknowledges him.

McGuane's novels traverse the boundary between a world that is disappearing and one that has come to take its place. The past vanishes, leaving only traces of itself in a new world. But like salmon compelled by some inner voice to return to their original stream, there emerges a yearning and an ache to know what we have come from. In Panama, Chet's dislocation from his father symbolizes this loss of a true connection to the past. The search to find the father is an effort to understand the self and take one's place in the continuum of time which moves from past to future.

The bridge between the past and the present is the shadowy span between history and myth, freedom and individuality. McGuane senses the numinous power attached to legend, stories, and symbols as images of history. Through memory and ritual, man is integrated with his past.

In this sense that past does return and man emerges from historical (chronological) time to the infinitely recoverable "mythic" time.

"In a world that changes, man must also change,"[17] said William Faulkner, but between the world that is disappearing and the one that must inevitably take its place, McGuane sees room for the belief that "the world to come will be shaped forever in memories and legend."[18]

Notes - Chapter Three

[1] John Dorschner, "Thomas McGuane: Portrait of the Author as a Young Director" in Authors in the News, Vol. 2 (Detroit: Gale, 1976), pp. 194-197.

[2] John J. White, Mythology in the Modern Novel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 38.

[3] Peter Muntz, The Shapes of Time: A New Look at the Philosophy of History (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1977), p. 52.

[4] Thomas McGuane, Panama (1978; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1979), p. 150. Further references to this work appear in the text.

[5] Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations (New York: Warner Books, 1979), p. 176.

[6] Thomas McGuane, Foreward, Vanishing Breed: Photographs of the Cowboy and the West, by William Albert Allard (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), pp. 6-7.

[7] William A. Settle, Jr., Jesse James Was His Name: Or, Fact and Fiction Concerning the Careers of the Notorious James Brothers of Missouri (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1966), p. 199.

[8] "James, Jesse (Woodson)," Encyclopedia Britannica: Micropaedia V, p. 510.

[9] Ency Brit., p. 510.

[10] McGuane, Foreward, p. 6.

[11] Frederick L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, Faulkner in the University (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 1959), p. 67.

[12] Richard P. Adams, Faulkner: Myth and Motion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 150.

[13] Joe P. Tupin, M.D., Uriel Halbreich, M.D., and Jesus J. Pena, J.D., M.P.A., Transient Psychosis: Diagnosis, Management and Evaluation (New York: Bruner/Mazel, 1984), p. 25.

[14] William Faulkner, Absalom, Absalom! (1936; rpt. New York: Random House, 1951), p. 186.

[15] McGuane, Vanishing Breed, foreward, p. 6.

[16] McGuane, Vanishing Breed, foreward, p. 7.

[17] Blotner, Joseph, ed., Selected Letters of William Faulkner, New York: Random House, 1977, p. 302.

[18] McGuane, Vanishing Breed, foreward, p. 7.

And he had never had the sense of home so much as when he felt that he was going there. It was only when he got there that his homelessness began. Thomas Wolfe

CHAPTER FOUR

NOBODY'S ANGEL

Return to the New West

Nobody's Angel, a book that was three years in the making after Panama, takes up the same theme that preoccupied Chet in that novel: the myth of the past in the present. This time the novel is set in the West, in a part of Montana which has seen cattle drives, cowboys, ranching and sheepherding, and later, booster hamlets, dams, and mineral extraction. McGuane's protagonist, Patrick Fitzpatrick, has returned to his family ranch after army duty in Germany. His father, a test pilot for Boeing, died in a crash; the body was never recovered. Patrick feels it is his job to look after his unpredictable grandfather and sister, and coming back to the ranch, he is looking for some sense of connection to this region and his family tradition, searching for a sense of belonging to this place where he spent his youth. Inevitably, as with all McGuane's heroes, the longing for tradition, for roots, is a quest for identity, a desire to find one's place in history.

In his previous novels, McGuane portrayed the confused and rootless lifestyle of modern America through narrative

disruption, the surreal fantasies of his protagonists, and rapid juxtapositioning of images and events (as in Panama and Ninety-Two in the Shade). In Nobody's Angel, McGuane uses a traditional chronological narrative, and less flamboyant characterization. One explanation of this change in structure and technique lies in the evolution of theme evidenced in Nobody's Angel. In previous novels, McGuane's characters inhabited an industrialized and spiritually diminished world looking for some way to give order and meaning to their lives. The dream was to inherit the greatness of the past by imitating the actions of heroic forebears or cultural heroes. Most often this entailed constructing a myth to supply themselves with an identity. This ideal ranged from the spurious history constructed by Spengler for the Centennial Club in The Sporting Club to the masterful fishing guide Skelton set out to become in Ninety-Two in the Shade, to the outlaw, Jesse James, after whom Chet modelled himself in Panama. In every case the impulse was to establish some continuity between the past and the present which would provide a sense of connection to history, to family tradition, and an escape from their sense of a degraded present.

In Panama, the hero may be said to have suffered from an excess of romanticism. Chet Pomeroy's fixation on Jesse James indicated a desire for a heroic family history that he felt had been lost. Chet longed to relate himself in direct

line from the heritage of outlaw freedom and frontier independence suggested by the legend of Jesse James. His adulation of this historical figure of an earlier America moved dangerously toward obsession. For Chet, Jesse James attained the status of myth. His determined identification with the outlaw's life blocked his responses to his own past (his father) and prevented him from moving forward with his personal life. Similarly, Tom Skelton held a "metallic extremist view of the world" which impelled him to guide even though he was killed for it. The "question of his courage and conviction was answered"[1] but such an extreme concept of honour no longer applies in Nobody's Angel.

In Nobody's Angel, the excessive romanticism is substantially reduced; the hero's impulses and actions are more under control.

The novel is more realistic; the high theatrics of Panama or Ninety-Two in the Shade are out of place. Commenting on this development of his style, McGuane has said:

> With Ninety-Two, I tried to invent a style, which I think I did. With Nobody's Angel I tried to improve it and give it the benefit of my age and increased experience, carefully comb it free of cheap effects and leave something which had some real dignity.[2]

Set in the West, the novel conveys the sense of a world which has been lost or, at any rate, one in which traditional values are fast disappearing. In Nobody's Angel, McGuane records the honourable defeat of Patrick

Fitzpatrick, an individual trying to become "part of something in the course of what was to come."[3]

In this chapter, I will discuss McGuane's symbolic use of Patrick Fitzpatrick's quest to repossess his history and link his identity to the private and historic past of his family and region. In the novel, the Heart Bar Ranch and the Deadrock region become a metaphor for the West; their emptiness and strangeness signify the enormous sweep of time and its power of change and death. As McGuane's protagonist attempts to make sense of his past, he also hopes to establish order and continuity for the future.

Coming home after his father's death in "shattered circumstances," Patrick feels disinherited of his past; in place of a connection to family and home, he feels a sense of loss. When his troubled sister, Mary, commits suicide, Patrick is left with a failing grandfather, some memories, and persistent "sadness-for-no-reason." Essentially, Patrick is mourning his "nonexistent past," (p. 59) a loss which he feels both personally and culturally. He describes himself as new to the country, "trying to establish a pattern in a new world." (p. 10)

Patrick's inaccessible father symbolizes McGuane's sense of the decline of a traditional society, that is, a family bound to the past through heredity and tradition and roots in one place.

> He knew that one reason he still felt so incomplete was that his father had farmed him out, left him as crow bait to education and family history. . . . Patrick had wandered away and Mary had flown into the face of it, the face of it being the connection they never had, an absence that was perilously ignored. (p. 86, my underscoring)

The realization Chet comes to at the end of Panama-that his father is a vital part of his own identity-is reiterated by Patrick when he says: "If my father is dead, how can I be alive?" (p. 21) In searching for his father's body, Patrick is looking for the missing connection that will restore him to his place in the family.[4]

In one sense, the situation of McGuane's protagonists has similarities to that of Faulkner's southern families: the Compsons, the Sartorises and the Sutpens; like Faulkner, McGuane uses a similar

> symbolic construction of inaccessible fathers and disinherited sons in a world where active faith in a traditional society has decayed. . . to. . . a violent, potentially self-destructive attempt to seize an inheritable dream of the past and make it relevant to the "fragmentary cosmos" that is life in the modern world.[5]

For McGuane, "a man's identity is not isolated in the present but is defined by its connections through time to all who have lived before."[6] Patrick accepts his disinherited state as a "fourth generation cowboy outsider" (p. 4) reluctantly, but instead of trying, through desperate acts like Chet's or Skelton's, to make his mark against time or restore the tarnished standard of family honour, he sets out to make a home by staying on the ranch. Though he

ultimately fails, Patrick's defeat represents the necessity of accepting history over fantasies and romantic myths. Nobody's Angel approaches the issue from a maturing point of view that the past which each person inherits and is shaped by, is balanced by his own freedom of action. The novel moves within this dialectic of freedom and fate, experience and history.

McGuane's remarks, in a magazine interview on Nobody's Angel, reveal this change from the existential defiance of his early writing to a more resigned outlook:

> This new novel combines my acquired and hopefully worked-for sense of having a place I want in terms of home with a view of someone who's born to it in shattered circumstances and can't stay. It is a book I thought had to be written with real solid familial feeling for the place the character's living in.[7]

In fact Nobody's Angel reflects some of McGuane's changing attitudes toward his own life:

> I still have storms. . . . But none of it's crazy. It's not where you don't know where the steering wheel or brake is. . . . One of the things I'm starting to get out of the Hemingway letters is that you don't become a born-again Christian over it, you don't join a monastery or quit drinking forever. You fight your fight like you would a brush fire. . . . I see it [life] now as a basic struggle, struggling <u>for</u> something. I'm struggling to buy this ranch. I'm struggling to have a family seat, a place that this fragmentary family of mine will call home even when they're all grown up and gone.[8]

Each of McGuane's protagonists asks the basic question: "Where am I?", a question which demands an understanding of the past in order to move to the future. And, in this discovery of their history and lineage, they

find the answer to the question: "Who am I?" McGuane is interested in defining man's relationship to himself, to society, to place, and to history. He would agree with Edmund Burke's idea of society as a relationship of the dead, the living, and the unborn. According to another historian:

> Mutilate the roots of society and tradition, and the result must inevitably be the isolation of a generation from its heritage, the isolation of individuals from their fellow men, and the creation of the sprawling, faceless masses.[9]

For McGuane, the desire for history is a desire for identity. Nobody's Angel expresses McGuane's conviction that ignorance of the past, whether personally or culturally, constitutes a kind of deprivation and leads to a feeling of pointlessness and futility regarding the purpose of life.

Patrick's problem in Nobody's Angel is this sense of an "amputated present,"[10] that is, a present which has no obvious relevance to the past. Patrick's longing to know his father is a longing for a link to his own origins, to the consciousness that bred him. Patrick's situation parallels what McGuane perceives as the plight of the modern West: the solid body of history and tradition that anchors a society to its past has been separated from the present by rapid change and progress. Now history has been turned into myth and historical events are accessible only in such false forms as movies like "Hondo's Last Move." The sudden death

of Patrick's father, vanishing like a comet through space, is the metaphorical equivalent of the Western past which McGuane feels has vanished. The plight of the modern Westerner has been eloquently expressed by Wallace Stegner:

> millions of westerners, old and new, have no sense of personal and possessed past, no sense of any continuity between the real western past which has been mythicized almost out of recognizability and a real western present that seems as cut-off and pointless as a ride on a merry-go-round.[11]

As a boy Patrick grew up in a tradition he is still close to:

> Patrick's daydreams fell easily back twenty years to summers riding in the hills, spooking game in the springs and down in the blue, shadowy draws, swimming in the gold dredge, girls present, the cold sky-blue submersion a baptism. . . remembering the flood of tears at twelve when he'd killed a spike buck in the same little grove where he and his father always cut their Christmas tree. . . . (p. 23)

When his parents divorced and his father went to work for Boeing, Patrick continued to live with his grandfather until his father sent him away to an eastern boarding school. After that it was the army and then his father's death. For Patrick, the Heart Bar ranch becomes the symbol of the permanence he desires, the promise of home and unchanging continuity.

McGuane's novels consistently feature a rootless protagonist whose wandering represents his psychic and spiritual estrangement from home, community, and the unified self-image that these provide. Going back to Montana and the ranch, trying "to pick up where he left off," (p. 66)

Patrick is trying to connect to his family tradition. The cowboy life that his grandfather and great-grandfather lived on the ranch gave them a clear-cut position in place and time. Patrick desires his life on the ranch to "carry him back to the sense of purpose his great-grandfather had. . . the general feeling of being able to see farther than your nose in front of you." (p. 150) Patrick's grandfather, too, comes from a time before sonic booms, interstate highways, or river diversions:

> as a boy he had nighthawked on the biggest of the northern ranches, had seen gunfighters in their dotage, had run this ranch like an old-time cowmans outfit. . . . (p. 61)

This is a tradition which had a sense of itself, a knowledge of its roots in the expansion of cattle and sheep ranching north from Texas to the Montana grasslands, and a familiarity with the stories of the daring evasion of outlaws from lawmakers on the Outlaw Trail.

Thus, when Patrick listens to his grandfather's recollections of the old days, of pack trips on mules into the mountains, of ranchers' tales of murdered wives and madmen, or when he can walk in the woods where the Crow buried their dead high in the treetops, Patrick feels close to the real Western past, not legendary but eternal in its recurring cycle of life and death:

> As then, when he felt the old man's past, or when he went among the ancient cottonwoods that once held the shrouded burials of the Crow, Patrick felt that in fact

> there had been a past, and though he was not a man with connections or immediate family, he was part of something in the course of what was to come. (p. 63)

It is such a world that Patrick has returned hoping to find; however, McGuane's ironic view confirms that the Old West is a dream of the past which is daily eroded by the invasion of the new West. The town of Deadrock (renamed so as to obscure its actual origins) is a place which betrays no trace of historical consciousness in its commercial district: "AGATES, TERRI'S BEAUTY SHOP, YUMMEE FREEZE, HEREFORDS: MONTANA'S GREATEST TREASURE, U-NAME IT WE'LL FIND IT." (p. 27) Now even Patrick's grandfather wants a bit part in the movies and a nice one-bedroom in the Arnoldcrest Apartments in town.

Patrick's desire to return to Montana and take up ranch life is to some extent a longing for the past, for the "series of bright ceremonies" (p. 142) located in an earlier time of his youth. As McGuane makes clear, such nostalgic formulas are a dream, but reality consists of process, disruption and change. The sustaining worldview ordered by the cowboy ethic of discipline, self-reliance and independence is fast becoming an obsolete code, what Faulkner calls "a game outmoded"[12] in Patrick's new world.

The Hazards of Freedom

Patrick's outlook, like that of McGuane's other protagonists, is from the beginning conditioned by his sense

of the impermanence of human events against the immensity of time and death contained in the granite mountains, empty river bottoms, and ancient ridges rimming the sky. Against the immensity and indifference of time which Patrick sees reflected in the cold grey Absaroka mountains and in the "heartless blue sky," Patrick longs for that which will withstand change and death and allow him to contemplate the future without foreboding, that is, he longs for a home and a sense of belonging:

> Growing up, as life blindsided you with its irreversible change, the heart pleaded for rituals that would never come: the West, the white West, a perfectly vacant human backdrop with its celebrated vistas, its remorseless mountains-and-rivers and its mortifying attempts at town building. (p. 134)

The problem Patrick faces is one that has preoccupied McGuane throughout his novels: the fear of the immensity of time. In this sense, the Montana setting of Nobody's Angel is an integral element of the novel's theme. For Patrick, the ranch and the surrounding mountains with their thin veneer of history seem indifferent to the passage of man. "You would have to care about the country," he says:

> Nobody had been here long enough and the Indians had been very thoroughly kicked out. It would take a shovel to find they'd ever been here. . . . The cowboys might have gotten here last week or just after the Civil War. . . .(p. 3)

For McGuane, place is as formative an influence on character as heredity and Patrick feels the anonymity of the Deadrock region translated to himself. Against the cold granite mountains and endless hills, Patrick feels dwarfed:

> He wanted his heart to seize the ancient hills, the old windmills and stock springs. Now all he seemed to care about were the things that lived and died on a scale of time an ordinary human being could understand. Then he wanted to know what those things were there for, taking every chance for knowledge about that. (p. 86)

Like the protagonists of previous McGuane novels, Patrick fears the immense expanse of freedom that time holds for the "superfluous" man with no buffer of home and family. Invariably, the fear of time is rooted in the fear of the hazards of freedom. For Patrick the ranch represents unlimited freedom, a freedom, however, he doesn't know what to do with, and is therefore ambivalent about:

> . . . the cowboy captain felt stranded on the beautiful ranch he would someday own, land, homestead, water rights, cattle and burden. He had no idea what he would do with it. (p. 65)

Sometimes he longs for a walkup in Castile with a cool stone kitchen, and a predictable daily regime, and a clear role in a traditional society.

One of the ways Patrick tries to construct a routine is through the ranch work. Like Tom Skelton in Ninety-Two in the Shade, Patrick does his best to find some kind of order and purpose to his existence through the exact requirements of ranch work. For Patrick, as for Skelton when he guided, the labour involved in breaking or shoeing horses, mending fences or hauling salt blocks is the closest he can get to a feeling of the wholeness of life. Like Hemingway, McGuane takes an exact joy in rendering the physical details of work and the satisfactions to be found in material things:

> Today was going to require a departure, a mighty departure, from the recent pattern. . . . Because the ranch was falling apart. . . . He hauled salt and mineral blocks, ponying a second horse up to the forest line. Then gathered thirty black yearlings from the brush along the creek where the flies had driven them from their feed. He gathered them into one end of the corral and he penned them off with a steel panel. He hung the heavy spray canister from a canvas strap over the sore muscles of his shoulders and waded among the fly-swarming backs, pumping with one hand and directing the nozzled wand with the other. . . .
>
> Still, he could fall back on the day's work, a new regime toward bringing the ranch back to order. There was some warm memory tugging at him. . . . Then it came: It was the velvet hydraulic rush of his tank over Germany, the orderly positions of the crew, and being the captain. (pp. 156-157, 160)

In spite of his efforts, Patrick still feels the lack of a connection between himself and the ranch and his family:

> He loved his sister and grandfather and horses; he loved the place. But he couldn't help thinking that it was edges and no middle. . . .
>
> He had come home hoping to learn something from his grandfather. But the old man was still too cowboy to play to nostalgia for anyone. . . . (pp. 131-133)

Patrick's struggle is to escape the romantic cliches about the West which his nostalgia for the past has given body to, and enter the sphere of self-determination, purpose and responsibility, that is, move into history. In Nobody's Angel, Patrick is working for a sense of reassurance against the infinity of time and death, and the only guarantee against such final things seem to be the human rituals of love, family, and home, and the power of memory. Against man's fate lies the human will to persist and endure and to retain the significance of that struggle in memory.

Therefore, juxtaposed with Patrick's despair over his sister Mary's burial ("I'll never see her again"), McGuane affirms the stubborn need to mark the human passage through remembrance:

> Gale-driven snow stretched immense drifts toward the west, over everything, over stones and monuments. . . . On the upper end of his own ranch, a miner had, years ago, filled coffee cans with cement and pressed marbles into its surface, picking out the name of his three dead children. (p. 118)

When Patrick Fitzpatrick meets Claire, wife of Tio Burnett, an Oklahoma oilman recently arrived in Montana, she seems to hold the promise of humanizing his rather empty ranch life. On the "hard green lawn" under an "inhuman blue sky," (p. 30) Claire's beauty connects her to the womanly tradition of warmth, home and love but she also radiates strength and self-reliance. Patrick immediately begins to reflect how life with Claire could heal his heart's wounds. When he thinks of Claire, Patrick can think of a reason to stay home.

Patrick and Claire's romance occurs at that intersection of freedom and fate, chance and destiny that intrigues McGuane because it involves past events, present intentions, and desire for the future. For example, Claire, launched on "one of the ineluctable trajectories of conflict that can be blamed upon something long ago," (p. 36) meets Patrick and sets in motion a love affair doomed from the start; Claire becomes Patrick's attempt to forestall the futility of his life; in her he feels the promise of

enduring love and in that love, a sense of connection to the ranch, roots in time.

The love affair between Patrick and Claire becomes the central conflict of Nobody's Angel not just in the inevitable stand-off between Tio and Patrick but also in that Claire forces Patrick to relinquish easy romantic escapism for fidelity to their respective responsibilities and promises. For example, Patrick expects Claire's love to change his life: "'Leave everything and come with me,'" (p. 146) he exhorts her. He goes on:

> "I wish it could be like in books. . . . I wish it could be a big simp love story."
>
> "I don't want to be in a big simp love story."
>
> "My job would be to save the ranch."
>
> "You're thinking of Gary Cooper."
>
> "I guess there's a difference."
>
> "A big difference. Gary Cooper saved the ranch. He had simp romances, too. Gary Cooper had his in barns. Book romances often take place in Europe. Cars instead of barns. . . ." (p. 147)

Brought together by chance, Patrick and Claire are not free to stay that way. The solution to Patrick's quest to become "part of something in the course of what was to come" does not lie with such easy romantic solutions.[13] Claire is more realistic than Patrick; she knows she will stand by her sick and somewhat crazy husband, Tio, as she promised to. Claire knows with a fatality more realistic than Patrick's dreams that the "deck was stacked" against their love and that

Patrick's dreams of escaping the "constant machine-gunning of the age" (p. 211) are impossible; "'Cheer up'" she says to Patrick:

> It was the only thing she could have said to return Patrick to the ground and make him stop circulating with ghosts and faulty desire. (p. 211)

Ghosts (which appear in various ways in most of McGuane's novels) symbolize an obsession with a past which is dead. Patrick's vision of himself and Claire against the world is, similarly, a fantasy, a "faulty desire." Such impossible wishes formed the substance of The Sporting Club, Ninety-Two in the Shade, and Panama and in their resistance to reality became destructive myths. But myth contradicts the flow of time and McGuane would agree with Faulkner that

> living is motion and motion is change and therefore the only alternative to motion is unmotion, stasis, death. . . .[14]

Claire's husband is a good example of an individual doomed by his total immersion in a myth which is cut off from his true situation. Driven by a need to prove himself to Claire and her rich relatives in Oklahoma, Tio rose from obscure origins to become successful in the oil business and to excell as a hunter, pilot, and gourmet cook among other pursuits. But Claire's infidelities became too much for him; under the pressure of an unpleasant external reality, Tio collapsed into fantasy and, inventing a Texas good ol' boy persona, he began to act out the legend. As Claire describes him:

> "He had just so much talent but he busted a gut for that. And about the two thousandth storage tank my people tried to shove down his throat, his mind quit that little bit, and in Tio's mind he was an oilman. He learned to farm things out. He bought everything he wore at Cutter Bill's in Dallas. He never rode a horse but now he couldn't miss Ruidoso." (pp. 191-192)

With his WATS line and oil-and-gas leases, and his urge to keep moving to escape his problems, Tio is a kind of caricature of the old cowboys. Patrick sees both Tio and Claire as "terrifyingly disconnected" (p. 222) from any roots. Tio's suicide in the enclosed world of his helicopter is a fitting symbol of his isolation.

Patrick and Claire, on the other hand, are among those fated to live. In the end, the real standoff in Nobody's Angel is between Patrick's desire and his reality. In the inevitable break with Claire, Patrick acquiesces to a fate which is darker than his romantic longing. With his grandfather living in town, his sister Mary dead, and Claire returned to Tulsa, Patrick is truly a victim of "shattered circumstances." Unable to put down roots and create a tradition with ranch or family, Patrick does not belong anywhere. He cannot really become "something in the course of what was to come" without the connections to place and time which constitute a tradition and locate the individual in history with a clear sense of his identity:

> He wasn't a captain or a cowboy. He thought for a moment, literally thought, about what he had set out for; and he knew one thing: he was superfluous. (p. 223)

Vance Bourjaily points out in his review of the novel:

> When Patrick Fitzpatrick uses the word superfluous about himself . . . it may or may not be an accurate self-assessment, but he has been placed by his author in a clear line of literary descent. His ancestry is German, British and romantic. . . .[15]

After a last hunt with his grandfather, Patrick leaves Montana and returns to the orderly regime of the army:

> Patrick's grandfather shot the best elk of his life. Patrick packed it out for him and arranged for it to be mounted and hung in the Hawk Bar, the place the old man could see from the window of his apartment.
> . . . .
> Anyway, his share of the lease money from the ranch allowed him to buy an old second-story flat in Madrid. He spent all his leave time there. Deke Patwell had it from someone who knew someone who knew someone that he had a woman in Madrid, an American named Marion Easterly; and that when she was with him, he was a bit of a blackout drinker. . . . In any case, he never came home again. (pp. 226-227)

Just as he sought but failed to locate his father's remains, Patrick's inability to find in the past the meaning of his situation on the ranch and in his family dooms him to a life without direction, without tradition. If it is true that the "fear of history is at bottom the fear of the hazards of freedom,"[16] then Patrick, with his mythical girlfriend, Marion, has chosen to escape the struggle for self-determination which constitutes history. It is not till his next novel, Something To Be Desired, that McGuane's protagonist acquires the ability to bring the past and the present together in terms of a tradition which will last into the future.

Notes - Chapter Four

[1] Albert Howard Carter III, "Thomas McGuane: An Interview," Fiction International, 4/5 (1975), 62.

[2] Jim Fergus, "After the storm," Rocky Mountain Magazine, Dec. 1981, p. 46.

[3] Thomas McGuane, Nobody's Angel (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 63. Further references appear parenthetically.

[4] Patrick's desire to find his father is evident in his deluded belief that the airplane he can see from his ranch which is hidden in a rock cleft up in the mountains, is his father's. In fact his father crashed in Oregon, somewhere over the Great Basin.

[5] Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan, The Dream of Arcady: Place and Time in Southern Literature (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 155.

[6] MacKethan, p. 88.

[7] Fergus, p. 88.

[8] Fergus, p. 88.

[9] Robert A. Nisbet, The Quest for Community (New York: Peter Smith, 1953), p. 25.

[10] Wallace Stegner, "History, Myth, and the Western Writer" in The Sound of Mountain Water (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1969), p. 193.

[11] Stegner, p. 199.

[12] William Faulkner, Sartoris (1929; rpt. New York: Random House, 1966), p. 380.

[13] Patrick's invention of Marion Easterly, his adolescent guardian angel, is a youthful version of such a romantic cliche.

[14] Joseph Blotner, Faulkner: A Biography, 2 vols. (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 1249.

[15] Vance Bourjaily, "The Story of a Superfluous Man," rev. of Nobody's Angel, by Thomas McGuane, New York Times Book Review, 7 Mar. 1982, p. 9

[16] Philip Rahv, "The Myth and the Powerhouse," in Literature and the Sixth Sense (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p. 214.

CHAPTER FIVE

SOMETHING TO BE DESIRED

In Thomas McGuane's essay about a deer hunting trip, the significant moment when the hunter emerges from cover to let loose the bullet against his prey becomes a glimpse of fatality and infinity juxtaposed:

> As I took that step, I knew he was running. He wasn't in the browse at all, but angling into invisibility at the rock wall, racing straight into the elevation, bounding toward zero gravity, taking his longest arc into the bullet and the finality and terror of all you have made of the world, the finality you know that you share even with your babies with their inherited dentition, the finality that any minute now you will meet as well.[1]

Something To Be Desired, McGuane's sixth novel, continues his preoccupation with time and death, with the split-second intensity that the death of any living thing gives to those who remain to reflect on it. The novel is the story of Lucien Taylor's life as he attempts to review and assess its significance against the finality of time and the long silence of death. This is a novel of redemption; as the tale of Lucien's past unfolds against his struggles and desires, there is a sense of understanding gained through pain. By the end of the novel, Lucien's existence becomes generalized to that of mankind's: unredeemable except in the struggle to redeem it. For the first time in a McGuane novel, the protagonist, rather than hovering on the rim between the past and the present, trying to find a

way to outlast it all, comes to grips with his life here and now, and with the struggle that this entails. Something To Be Desired is the history of Lucien's emergence from childhood immunity to evil and failure, and his initiation into the responsibilities of adulthood and the burden of consequences which oppose man's desire to transcend his human limitations.

In this chapter, I will discuss the hero's growth from a hopeless drifter to a man with knowledge of his identity and a firm sense of purpose. Separated from the father, as are all of McGuane's protagonists, Lucien feels "absolutely lost"[2] nor will he find himself and connect to his family and region until he learns to accept his individual past as something which can be redeemed in the ongoing struggle to live responsibly in the present and for the future.

Something To Be Desired is McGuane's latest novel and again, the pressure of the past on the present constitutes the primary theme. In each of his previous novels, McGuane's protagonist was an individual who regarded the passage of time as unendurable, that is, as a threatening process of change and disruption. In the disintegration of his family and the general loss of cultural tradition, this protagonist, like Quentin in The Sound and the Fury, read the destructive power of time. At a loss to regain the ideal state he imagines the past to have been, McGuane's hero compensates by creating a heroic myth out of his past and

connecting himself to this saving legend or code. For example, in Ninety-Two in the Shade and Panama, both Skelton and Chet believe that time has presided over the decline of their once proud families and each in his own way looks for an escape from his present circumstances. The fear of time and change is deeply rooted in McGuane's protagonists and their impulse is to remain in the past by means of the invention of a myth/legend or code/ritual.

Most of McGuane's protagonists are searching for a connection to their history, some assurance of continuity between what has taken place in the past and what is happening now. In dramatic terms, this quest is transposed to the realm of father-son relations, and the family ties that run from generation to generation. Something To Be Desired marks a change in the author's attitude toward time, a transition the first stirrings of which were felt in Panama and Nobody's Angel. In this novel, McGuane's protagonist is able to revise his view of time as a ticking clock, measuring out each numbered day until death. Lucien Taylor, looking back upon his life from the perspective of an adult, begins to feel time and consciousness as a continuum flowing forward into the present but also moving from "now" to "then." Time thus begins with ancestors and the worldview which they bequeathed. This spatial conception of time moves on to include Lucien's own struggle to define himself in a

particular place and time, and finishes with the knowledge that he gives to his own child, James, whom he describes as "a son still early in his journey." Thus an individual's identity holds within it the legacy of fathers and grandfathers and the potential of future generations. Memory is the connection between the present and the past, the continuity that begins with "I remember. . . ." McGuane suggests that there is a design and pattern to human existence, a traceable line of ideals and influences, each grounded in its own place and historical moment, extending from one generation to the next. As Something To Be Desired clearly indicates, in the awareness of history is an exploration of the depths of man's consciousness.

While the novel is narrated primarily from the third-person omniscient point of view, events take place through Lucien's eyes. By means of the narrative technique of flashback and flashforward, this voice occupies a unique position poised not only between the present and the past but also within the past and what will become the future. McGuane's use of this eminently Faulknerian technique provides an ongoing juxtaposition of the present against the past.[3] The reader sees the emergence of Lucien's present self within the context of his former self. It is as though one's mature identity is a process of resolving many identities through time.

The novel opens with a flashback to Lucien Taylor's childhood (though the reader is not aware of this fact until the end of the chapter.) McGuane reveals Lucien's childish perceptions of his father and their trip to the Crazy Mountains in Montana. A glimpse of the kind of man Lucien will become is visible in the figure of Gene, his father. Having taken his son out to "'those wide open spaces. . . where they don't hamstring a man for standing a little tall,'" (p. 17) and become lost, he has led the two of them around in circles for two days despite the fact (which McGuane ironically inserts) that they can see their car and "could have walked to the highway in a few hours." (p. 4) The illusion of danger and risk is important to Lucien's father as it will later be to Lucien too. Committed to living out the legend of a romantic hero, Lucien's father flees his wife for Peru, accompanied by his good-times friend, Art Clancy, for "the winter segment of a thing called the World Adventure Series." (p. 5) In this setting, Gene Taylor writes deranged and guilty letters to his son in a manner strangely foreshadowing Lucien's future behaviour toward his own son. Lucien's description of these letters illuminates the worldview which he will ultimately share with his father:

> The writing was strong and linear and spoke of romantic escape: sometimes Lucien's father was alone the romantic escapist; sometimes Lucien and his father were depicted in the letters as escaping; sometimes there was anger and glory, sometimes just anger. In all

> cases it was the world that was against them, a world that no longer cared for the individual with his dread of homogeneity. (p. 6)

McGuane's familiar theme of the child wounded by inadequate parents occurs again in this novel. At boarding school, Lucien feels "homesick and there was no home, nothing to fill a caissonned heart, until the blazing satisfaction of his father's arrival." (p. 4) With the divorce of his parents, Lucien's father exits forever except in the passionate memory of his son who is free to shape himself in the same romantic mode as his father. The final paragraph of Chapter One suggests the peril of such freedom:

> When Lucien was an adult, when rain whirled up through the hayfield and scattered birds with its force, he heard his own name in the rock garden and knew he was free, as the saying once went, to dispose himself as he pleased. (p. 21)

McGuane uses the breakdown of the father-son relationship to symbolize the loss of order in Lucien's world.[4] From here, the fear of freedom and responsibility in a world without values or moral groundrules becomes the staging point for the hero's invention of himself or imitation of a romantic model.

The importance of McGuane's flashforward at the end of Chapter One lies in the reader's realization that the story is being told from some point in the future. Implicit in this kind of narrative viewpoint is the speaker's perspective, that is, the fact that events are being retold with an understanding gained from a greater depth of

experience. Lucien's past, together with the people and places which had an effect on the man he became, is now being appraised in order to assess and possibly recapture its real significance.

Something To Be Desired, is, therefore, an account of Lucien's "voyage of self-discovery."[5] As McGuane puts it: "Lucien had taken the position that he was growing to meet himself, that he was ascending to a kind of rendezvous." (p. 59) Lucien's identity becomes the sum of his "many roles in time" like a landscape which bears traces of the forces of wind, water, and weather which have moved across it. McGuane provides a compressed account of Lucien's history, separated neatly into two five-year periods, the first in Montana: "For almost five years, Lucien and his mother lived alone on the street behind the library," (p. 21) and the second away from home: "Five air-conditioned years went by in the backwater posts of Central America." (p. 25) Between these two periods is Lucien's marriage, an event he later sees as a choice between two destinies:

> In his first year of college he dated two girls from his hometown, Emily and Suzanne. Under Emily he was going to be a rancher and a painter of sporting subjects on the order of Thomas Eakins. Under Suzanne he would grasp desperately at his deep testability, land himself among the upper percentiles and, having trained himself only generally, go off to Latin America for the United States Information Agency, spraying leaflets on the mestizo millions. He married Suzanne. (pp. 22-23)

After five years of married life, Lucien is suddenly struck by the "lack of high romance in his life." (p. 26)

He abandons Suzanne to return to Montana and post bail for Emily (his old flame who has recently murdered her doctor husband). Lucien hopes to grasp the brass ring of an alternate fate as a rancher and painter. But only time brings Lucien to a knowledge of the consequences of his action:

> So their departure was without emphasis, staged as a clear fork in the road. They would be moved by forces to differing sections of the grid.
>
> In any event, the process of stain had begun; he would not have known what to call it as it sank deeper inside him, nor been able to assess the turbulence and damage that was to come; but it was certainly shame. (p. 29)

Lucien's return to Montana and Emily becomes an event which will have the significance of a turning point in his life. McGuane opens the chapter with a forward projection in time ("Later he would think it was early in the morning. He was going back some but it would have had to have been before breakfast." [p. 30]) which emphasizes Lucien's memory of the Emily episode with the clarity of one of those moments which mark the "before and after."

Having swept to the rescue of Emily in hopes of recreating the romance he once had with her, Lucien's hopes are based on the assumption that time has not changed Emily or himself. "'Why, how nice for you,'" Emily says to him:

> "To have a life's theme. An old flame. An old flame that never dies is like those overbuilt goddamn English shoes rich ladies used to wear. The illusion of everlasting life." (p. 41)

As in his other novels, McGuane's point is that such illusions are a kind of romantic escapism, a denial of reality in the futile desire to transform life into legend. In fact, Lucien's relationship with the mysterious Emily will become one of his "selves in time" which must be outgrown. As with Patrick in Nobody's Angel and Chet in Panama, McGuane subtly lampoons the romantic illusions of his protagonists: "But for a short time long ago, Emily and Lucien were going into the sunset as a composer and a painter, leaving the world a richer place." (p. 48) And Emily's lawyer sees clearly the folly of Lucien's dream of a happily-ever-after life with Emily:

> "I am going to try to reduce her sentence, string out the road show through appellate court, work on her eligibility for pardon and just all-round obfuscate justice like the good mouthpiece I am. You know, for a country boy."
> "I see."
> "No, you don't see. What you see is acquittal for her and a fresh start for the two of you. Y'know, quiet evenings around your paint-by-numbers kit out there to the ranch." (p. 51)

heroic posturing, that is, a futile desire to transform life into legend. However, as William Faulkner recognized, "man, caught in the ineluctability of time, can never avenge himself on time"; therefore man is "obliged to endure his own nature as man, to prevail over his own confinement in historical circumstance."[6] McGuane would agree with this view and advocate the same human virtues of courage and endurance and compassion which Faulkner held to determine the meaning of life against the arbitrariness of fate. When

Emily departs practically overnight and leaves everything to Lucien, he is rudely awakened from his idyllic dreams and forced to take responsibility for the ranch. Only in Something To Be Desired does McGuane's central character successfully overcome the romantic myth and find a means of going on by accepting his circumstances, taking up the burden of the past and using these as the basis for wiser action in the present. McGuane's protagonists in his other novels cannot come to terms with their history and, therefore, are not able to live in the present. In Something to Be Desired, history becomes, in this sense, the necessary "deprivation of the mythic existence."[7]

It is only through his utter isolation on the ranch that Lucien learns the true value of the connection to family and community. Separated from his wife, his son, and now his lover, Lucien is almost completely disconnected from the world. As his solitude deepens, he begins to reflect upon his life and decides he is "ready for a new one" (p. 57):

> He watched the light and clouds make changes in his window; he was the revolving shadows in the peaks of the Crazies, and night arriving not simultaneously but in different places and at different times. He began to wonder what screwballs lived here in other days who had hidden whiskey bottles under the porch or made the dog graves by the creek. (p. 56)
>
> By the time early day in all its effulgence had penetrated to the bottom of the smallest gullies and sent the dullest prairie chicken into hiding with a departing hawk-warning cry, Lucien had climbed two thousand feet above his ranch in an attempt to find out where he was. He was beginning to understand what he had paid to be here alone.(p. 58)

With no ties to family or home, Lucien feels "lost" and when, in answer to his question "Where am I?" the motel receptionist replies "the El Western," McGuane intends no small irony in the substitution of a motel for the sense of a family and cultural tradition that Lucien desires. Lucien describes his rootless state:

> Growing up in a small town, he didn't quite belong in land he knew and loved, and he no longer belonged in town. . . .
>
> Belong. What a word. Drives everyone fucking nuts, thought Lucien. You look at children and they belong where you drop them, while time only makes them lost. (p. 77)

McGuane uses Lucien's sense of alienation from place to symbolize his alienation in time. Drifting lethargically down the river on his rubber raft, Lucien is likewise adrift in his life with no responsibilities or domestic rituals to mark the passage of time. Deprived of his identities as husband to Suzanne and devoted suitor to Emily, Lucien feels bereft and exposed to forces of time and fate beyond his control:

> A great blue norther made up and came down off the High Line. . . . He walked along while the deep cold made a bas-relief map of his own skull, exposing bone through flesh. . . . Suddenly his small white frame house seemed a pale, brave island in eternity. A more analytical person might have concluded that this solitary regimen was a good and happy one for him. But he was old enough to know that loneliness, like some disturbance, would begin to form. (p. 74)

McGuane's point is that, particularly in the West, the failure to remember and value history leads to a cultural vacuum. Lucien begins to feel a kind of existential despair

at the arbitrary nature of goals and purposes within such freedom. The immensity of the land, "a land forever strange," (p. 122) parallels Lucien's feeling of insignificance in time, and the meaninglessness of human effort against obliterating death. It is only by learning the necessity of individual responsibility that Lucien can begin to find some meaning in his life, regain his family, and move into the sphere of history and lose his fear of time.

How does a man locate himself in time? McGuane sees a coherent view of existence as emerging from genuine roots in one's place and history. The connection to an authentic past validates both individual and culture in an established tradition which offers the individual a secure identity and in its very continuity, prevails against infinity and death. When in a drunken stupor, at the absolute nadir of his own self-destructive behaviour, Lucien sees the red ocher paintings of elk left by the Indians in the caves outside of town, he decides that he too wants to "get a few things down" before his life is over. His longing is not to perform glamorous or heroic deeds in order to immortalize himself but rather to establish out of his own life and the struggle to feed and keep the cattle and saddle horses, and the pleasure of shooting grouse and hunting elk in the fall--out of all this, to connect himself to the country in the ordinary human way of home and family. Like the Indians

whose spirits, "smoky and redolent," still hang over the ranch, Lucien desires to become part of a tradition which will go forward in time. As spring emerges from the depths of winter, Lucien too begins to renew himself.

As an eventful site in Lucien's past, the hotspring on his ranch proves to be the catalyst for the next cycle of Lucien's life. The spring becomes the centre of Lucien's hopes for the future. Moving and restoring old buildings from the Deadrock region, Lucien creates a resort spa which is gratifyingly successful, attracting visitors from around the country.

> Lucien walked around past the spring. It was now quiet, and he tried to imagine it as it had been when he was here with his father and the cloud of crows lifted from its surface into the sky. . . . And he thought of the days he floated the river alone, carrying a life jacket in his son's size. (pp. 170-171)

Lucien hopes it will attract Suzanne and his son, James, whom he misses with the sharpness of disappointed hopes. "I am a family man", he insists, "despite what has been stolen." (p. 69)

Sigmund Freud believed that through memory, repetitions could be replaced by recollections. The saving truth of this realization can been seen in Lucien's relationship with his son. Separated from the boy as his father was remote from him, Lucien can recall his own lonely desire for his father's return and he determines to be reunited with James. Reflecting on his own life, Lucien sees his abandonment of his own family as a repetition of his

father's flight. He decides to escape the destructive pattern which he seems doomed to repeat: "it was as if the same master stood over them with a stick and not only drove them but drove them in circles. . . ." (p. 8) In breaking free from the example of his father, Lucien assumes individual responsibility for his actions, which is the mark of maturity. This is the first time in any of McGuane's novels that the protagonist has been able to escape the burden of disillusionment and futility bequeathed by the father. Lucien sees his own life and his mistakes as indelibly stamped with the mark of his father, but also feels his own freedom to engage the world and pass his own unique identity onto his child, who will in turn "emerge from his frightened self and go on and be happy. . . ." (p. 161)

In many ways the son's identity is mysteriously defined by the father. A father stamps his mark on his son and releases him into time. On a broader level, the relationship between the father and the son is what McGuane sees as the paradoxical tension between the authority and tradition of the past and the freedom and necessity to go forward.

Tradition is therefore similar to a father's authority; born into a culture, you inherit a particular worldview which is a bequest you carry with you to enrich and finally pass on to the next generation. The present, therefore,

grounded in the memories and history, moves forward in one vast design of time and eternity.

Something of this is conveyed when Lucien takes his son on an expedition to band hawks. The banding of the hawk becomes a metaphor for man's condition as both free and fettered, shaped both by freedom and necessity, answering both to experience and to history:

> When the impact came, James jumped up screaming and began to crawl off. Lucien sat up, holding the hawk by the feet in one gauntleted hand. . . .
>
> Each time the bird's wings beat, Lucien could actually feel the lift in his forearm, could feel the actual pull of the falcon's world in the sky. He had seen hawks on the ground, graceless as extremely aged people, and he knew their world was sky. He'd seen old cowboys limp to their horses, then fly over the land, and he knew what their world was too. He wanted his own life to be as plain.
>
> By concentration and by ignoring the prospects of a bite, Lucien managed to get the band on. . . . Lucien held the terrifying bird out before him and released his grip. The falcon pulled vertically from his glove and with hard wing-beats made straight into deep sky, swept straight off and was gone. (pp. 124-125)

For McGuane, the past can be either restricting or a means to grow into the future. For example, James fears his father's power over him; "'You're never going to let me go,'" he says bitterly to his father. Lucien, himself, was trapped in his awe of his father's romantic exploits but he wants his son to emerge from childhood with roots in family and place which will sustain him in the future.

In a manner which is by turns tragic, and comic, Something To Be Desired reveals the process by which Lucien learns to endure his own past which is always present except

in memory. Out of his mistakes and various identities in time (child, lover, husband, single rancher, entrepreneur) Lucien has emerged as an individual with a knowledge of his goals and his reponsibilities. When Emily, the myth-like "Lost Sweetheart," returns, she is a ghost from one of his past selves and her mystery and glamour mean nothing any more to Lucien. When he drives her at night to the airport to send her away, Lucien is, in a sense, banishing a ghost from his past and accepting the responsibility for Suzanne and James. By this act, he begins to feel his place in the scheme of time:

> There were huge dry-land farms on either side of them where the wheat had been cut in panels of design and immensity. . . . Whatever it was that was happening to Lucien seemed as if it could have come from some source thousands of years or thousands of miles away. (p. 172)

As he sees Suzanne and James off, there is a clear suggestion that the family will be reunited in the future.

In Something to Be Desire, McGuane has drawn, for the first time, a hero who is sufficiently mature to handle death and loss. In his early novels, the absence of the father represented the hero's inability to see himself clearly in his own time and place, linked to values and tradition which could carry him forward to the future. Lucien is McGuane's first hero to have struggled and overcome the desire for a myth to replace his own painful history. Finally, in this novel, the past is put into perspective as a formative but not restrictive force. The

past, symbolized by his father, no longer dictates his actions: "'Weren't you always afraid of your father?'" Suzanne asks him. "'I guess I was,'" Lucien answers, "'but he's long gone now.'" (p. 173) As McGuane makes clear, Lucien's sense that he is growing to meet himself is a process of self-discovery, the discovery that by enduring his own confinement in historical circumstances, man prevails over the long arc into oblivion.

Notes - Chapter Five

[1] Thomas McGuane, An Outside Chance (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 242-3. An interesting essay written in 1980, the final line of which--"This is either the end or the beginning of something"--echoes a similar line from Faulkner's The Bear: "It was the end of the beginning of something."

[2] Thomas McGuane, Something To Be Desired (New York: Random House Vintage Contemporaries, 1984), p. 78. All further references to this work appear parenthetically in the text.

[3] Faulkner explains his attitude toward time in his novels: "There isn't any time. . . . There is only the present moment, in which I include both the past and the future, and that is eternity. In my opinion, time can be shaped quite a bit by the artist; after all, man is never time's slave." The Lion in the Garden, ed. James Meriwether and Michael Millgate (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 70.

[4] A similar alienated relationship between father and son exists between Quentin and the ineffectual Mr. Compson in The Sound and the Fury.

[5] Robert Roper, "Something To Be Desired", rev. of Something To Be Desired, by Thomas McGuane, New York Times Book Review, 16 Dec. 1984, p. 11.

[6] Quoted in David Minter, William Faulkner: His Life and Work (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 247.

[7] Lewis P. Simpson, "Yoknapatawpha and Faulkner's Fable of Civilization," in The Maker and the Myth: Faulkner and Yoknapatawpha (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1982), p. 143. Simpson actually said "History is the pathetic deprivation of the mythic existence," but I think McGuane would take a broader view.

CONCLUSION

The existing scholarship on Thomas McGuane is limited to a few journal articles (none of them very profound), several biographical citations in reference works on twentieth-century American writers, a few rare interviews, and a number of book reviews. My thesis, therefore, is the first in-depth study of Thomas McGuane as an author worthy of consideration in the field of contemporary western American literature. To a considerable extent, I have broken new ground in my interpretation of McGuane's main themes.

The five McGuane novels discussed in this thesis describe a "mythology of disappearance," that is, a strategy of coping with the past which has disappeared and is recoverable only through memory. "Trying to know ourselves"[1] without a connection to the past is a recurring theme throughout these novels. This thesis deals with McGuane's treatment of this loss of a continuing tradition in the lives of his heroes and, by analogy, in modern America. As the author says: "Trying to know ourselves, living in the West with its thin European history, is a drive I'd concur about."[2]

In each chapter, the mythology of disappearance takes a different form, from the creation of a myth of replace actual history in The Sporting Club to the assumption of a

heroic code or legend in order to escape destructive time in Ninety-Two in the Shade and Panama. Set in the West, Nobody's Angel reflects McGuane's evolving treatment of the influence of the past on the present. The protagonist here makes a valiant attempt to link himself to place and family as a means of establishing a tradition. Yet the struggle to escape the myth of the past is not resolved until Something To Be Desired. This latest novel by McGuane describes the protagonist's arrival at an acceptance of the freedom of the future within the bounds of the past.

My conclusion is that, in these five novels, McGuane has successfully dealt with the theme of the past in constant dialogue with the present. From early novels that were flamboyant in characterization and bizarre in plot, McGuane's novels progressed to a subtler presentation of theme and a more realistic presentation. In the last two books, set in McGuane's own Montana region, he achieves a simple lyricism in his prose which intensifies his theme of the validity of man's effort to find himself in time.

Between the first and last novel studied, McGuane shows an increasing understanding of how history and myth merge in memory. From an artificial conception of history as nostalgic invention in The Sporting Club, he moves to the somewhat ironic view of the past transformed into heroic legend in Ninety-Two in the Shade and Panama. Moving away from ironic detachment in his last two novels, McGuane

reveals a deeper realization that the past is not a dead and static myth to be revived but a living force which, through memory, flows onward into the present and future.

McGuane's rich and complex books deserve far more attention than they have so far received. A wide range of subjects needs to be explored, such as the similarities in theme and style to Hemingway, especially in the emphasis on ritual and "code" in McGuane's early novels, the religious motifs and/or archetypal symbols in his work, McGuane's transposition of Faulknerian concerns to the West, and McGuane's place in the field of western American writing from Wallace Stegner to the new writing coming out of the West, more "primitive" in style than experimental, with bleak themes.[3] As well, an interesting discussion could be made as to whether McGuane is a primarily comic or serious writer.

Notes - Conclusion

[1] Letter from McGuane to this writer, 21 Aug., 1985.

[2] Letter.

[3] Richard Ford, David Quammen are two examples.

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